

Seeing Green Early On

Robert Wallace's Lifelong Commitment to Sustainable Energy Pays off



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By Elizabeth Levy Malis

Photo By John Dean

As an undergraduate engineering student at University of Pennsylvania, Robert L. Wallace, now president and founder of Baltimore-based Bithenergy Inc., gravitated to solar and wind energy in particular. "Green by design ... it's in my spirit," he says.

Wallace's company, Bithenergy (www.bithenergy.com), earned top honors in "Fortune Magazine's" 2015 Inner City 100 List as the No. 1 fastest growing company in an urban area. That ranking comes from Initiative for a Competitive Inner City (ICIC), a national, non-profit research and advisory organization founded by Harvard Business School Professor Michael Porter.

As for awards and accolades, Wallace has earned plenty. That's not what thrills him. Sustainable energy does.

"It was the love of my youth – before it was popular," he says. "I got excited about it early on. I said maybe it's not a fit now, but one day we'll get there. It took 30 years. Now, we're at a point of no return. Green industry is here to stay."

Wallace provides expertise in mechanical engineering, energy engineering, systems engineering, application development and management consulting. He heads three enterprises: Bithgroup Technologies, EntreTeach Learning Systems and Bithenergy.

In 1992, Wallace founded Bithgroup to help people through technology. Much later, Bithenergy emerged as an energy engineering and management company, developing and implementing energy management, energy efficiency and renewable energy solutions for government and commercial clients.

His third entity, EntreTeach provides workshops, seminars, training curriculums and training software for the education of the entrepreneurial class, according to company literature.

"Bob's a very creative, entrepreneurial guy," says Martin

S. Lampner, president and chief executive officer of The Chimes family of services, which at its gala honored Wallace. "He's made it possible for an organization like Chimes to get solar energy. We were the first large scale non-profit in Baltimore County to use it. We couldn't have done it without him."

Wallace's efforts impact beyond a local sphere. He called this I-95 BUSINESS reporter while he traveled in New England scouting solar project sites. He's won a contract to build a solar power plant at Ft. Campbell in Kentucky. He's put more than 33 megawatts of solar energy along parts of the East Coast.

Overcoming the Odds

Admittedly, Wallace has an unusual beginning for an engineer-turned-entrepreneur. Ultimately, this history may have helped sparked his environmentalism.

As a child, Wallace grew up in the public housing buildings of Baltimore City's Cherry Hill neighborhood. "We were a poor family; it was a tough neighborhood," he says.

"Our home was built next to a landfill, and us kids played sports on a field adjacent to a waste facility." Vividly, Wallace remembers the "gases and smoke." He recalls "rat problems from the landfill and air pollution from the incinerator."

Influenced by that reality, "I have a strong value not to have a polluted world. I became an engineer and looked into the science of it," says Wallace. "Wind and solar energy make sense environmentally and economically." One particular childhood memory proves a turning point. Wallace tells the story: "As kids, we used to play on the railroad tracks. Yet the sign said 'no trespassing.' Even my mother told me never to go on the railroad tracks. Still one hot, August day – I must have been 12 or 13 – my buddies and I were on the tracks. We saw two guys [transportation police] walking toward us. My buddies all ran away. I didn't. I walked right

between the men," he says.

"They took me in [for trespassing]. Daddy was working [as a laborer], so my mom came to get me. At the time, she was a janitor for the Baltimore school system. When she came to take me home, they were disrespectful to her. I got angry, but my mother stopped me from getting [in more trouble]. They let me go. But during the trip home, it was hard for me to look at my mother. I glanced and saw tears in her eyes. It was a defining moment. I told myself I will never do anything again to bring dishonor or pain to my family."

During his parents' lifetime, as well as after they passed away, Wallace held true to his self-pledge. In fact, he soared beyond it – outstanding in his fields of endeavor.

Making a Difference

Today, Bithenergy stands at the pinnacle of success. But rising to the top is nothing new for Wallace. As a student at then-all-boys Baltimore Polytechnical Institute, he earned good grades, played three sports and proved to be a leader. Gifted in math and science, he secured a scholarship to an Ivy League college. He followed with graduate school at the Amos Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College, where he researched successful characteristics of minority entrepreneurs.

It's a knowledge base that he uses today to help others succeed. Also, he put that information to work for himself in launching his companies. "I tried to emulate what I learned," says Wallace.

Top companies like IBM, Procter & Gambler, DuPont and Westinghouse have hired Wallace. He remains a sought-after speaker and has authored multiple books – many of them aimed to help small business and minorities. Also, he serves as affiliate professor at the Sellinger Graduate School of Business at Loyola University Maryland, where he instructs emerging leaders on the power and promise of innovation and entrepreneurship in the global economy. Yes, there is a photograph on display in Bithenergy's offices of Wallace shaking hands with President Barack Obama. "In 2008, President Obama put resources into renewable energy," says Wallace. "Obama put capital and investment into this industry. He created an environment that minimized the risk – and I saw an opportunity."

So in 2009, Wallace launched Bithenergy to provide comprehensive renewable energy systems development, energy consulting and energy management. In that time, the company has grown from five employees to more

than 30. Headquartered in Baltimore's historic Mt. Vernon district, Bithenergy's office building itself dates back to the 1820s. Originally constructed as a private home, it's been occupied for more than 100 years. In fact, "FDR once slept here," says Wallace.

Prior to Wallace moving in, a law firm had most recently occupied the 8,000-square-foot, five-level space. Wallace's corporate offices boast "a fireplace in every room – and every fireplace is unique," he says. With its headquarters as command central, "I travel a lot and collect masks when I travel," says Wallace, father of five children and grandfather to seven. Populating his office wall are myriad masks – labeled with the country of origin, mainly countries in Africa, but also China, Mexico and Singapore, among others. To date, he has traveled to 35 nations. "My goal is to travel to all 250 nations before I die," he says.

Back in his office, Wallace displays a globe of the world. Near the wall of masks, he's placed drums he acquired in Ghana and Ivory Coast. Upon his executive desk sits a curiosity: a Spartan-style helmet rumored to be a prop from the movie "300."

On his personal office's fireplace mantelpiece – alongside awards – sits a photograph of former-heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali. "He's one of my heroes," says Wallace, whose father was a boxer, too. In fact, Wallace shares that his father was a sparring partner to Joe Lewis.

Reminds Wallace, "You know Ali always said, 'I am the greatest!' He said it before he was great. He spoke of what was to come. You have to speak success. You have to speak possibilities ... that becomes part of who you are." It's one of Wallace's mantras for business success. Additionally, he advises fellow entrepreneurs: "When you really want something, think outside the box."

Wallace believes mentoring is "critical. I've been blessed that people in business gave me advice and guidance. I try to do that for others. I believe in a commitment to that – especially for minorities, including female entrepreneurs and people of color."

Fittingly, Wallace, head of an energy company, exudes high-energy when he enters a room. He defines it as an "intensity of purpose." It's something he brings to both business and personal endeavors. An elder, active in his church, Wallace goes on missions. He has helped build orphanages and water systems in Africa.

He's a sports enthusiast, too. Regularly, he plays basketball with guys half his age. Kickboxing, Taekwondo and swimming round out his fitness routine. "If I had the skills, I would be a professional football or basketball player," he laments.

But it's a gain for green industry that he's not. A gain for Baltimore, too.

"He's very committed to his community, and the city of Baltimore," says Lampner. "He's a genuinely good man. He offers the key to his success to others." 195

Generation to Generation: Giving Back to Community with Power52

These days, another member of the Wallace family finds himself front and center: engineer R. Daniel Wallace, who is one son of Bithenergy's Robert L. Wallace.

CEO Wallace tapped his son and namesake, Robert Daniel, to serve as president of newly created Power52, a non-profit organization dedicated to reduce the cost of energy for low-income families by developing renewable energy projects, including job training and long-term employment.

"It's a false belief that solar energy can only benefit the well to do. That's just not true anymore," says the elder Wallace. "P52 will show a way to give benefits to low-income consumers."

While the Wallace name carries weight in many circles, the Wallaces added heft by naming former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis as Power52's vice president.

"My son and Ray are driving P52," says the elder Wallace. "They are about the same age. They are friends. [We thought they could] do it together. We are teaming up with Ray Lewis to show our commitment to community and to get the attention we are not going to get on our own."

Already, Power52 has attracted big name support. It's backed by grants from the Abell Foundation. It has garnered commitments from Whiting Turner. Baltimore Gas and Electric is collaborating, too. In addition, Power52 vows to work closely with the Baltimore City School system.

The Power52 website (www.power52.org) features a photograph akin to a symphony of solar panels. Overlaying that image are these words: "community solar solution." That's the key.



Former Baltimore Ravens star Ray Lewis (left) and R. Daniel Wallace have teamed up for Power52, a nonprofit organization that aims to bring renewable energy to low-income neighborhoods and provide job training and employment opportunities.

"Power52 provides job training, employment opportunities and scholarships to the city communities it serves," says the younger Wallace.

According to its website, Power52 finds locations in the city. Then, it trains that location's city residents to construct solar farms that feed power directly back to the community at deeply discounted rates. This creates affordable power and job training and employment opportunities.

The Wallaces like the way they are giving back: solar as an economic energy source and training people for jobs.

"They can come to our mentorship program. Then, they can move on to the internship component, where they'll be placed with a corporate partner. The last piece is either a job placement or college or technical skills," sums up R. Daniel Wallace.

"We want to share the wealth. We want to use it to benefit more people. Whatever I do, I want to have an impact. I want to make a difference in quality of life," says Robert L. Wallace.

Follow Dr. Wallace on Social Media or sign up for his newsletter for regular updates, insights, and more!

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