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By RHONDA CROWDER

Staff Reporter

JuJaun Robinson and Michael Carstarphen met while working in a steel mill together. During those days, Carstarphen always told Robinson that he wanted to bury dead people.

While working at the steel mill, they went as far as to come up with the business plan but the idea stagnated until something happened that many would believe to be unfortunate.

They both were laid off, but, instead of burying their heads in the sand, they saw it as the perfect opportunity to pursue Castarphen's idea since they finally had the time to concentrate on building a business.

Shortly there after, RC Vault Company was born and eventually R&C Monument Company followed as offering headstones is the perfect compliment to the former.

“The vault company was always a dream of Mike’s,” said Robinson.

Upon graduating from Monroe High School in Lower Peach Tree, Alabama, Carstarphen worked for the only other Black man in the burial vault business in this area after he moved to Cleveland
. He got to know the owner from going to him everyday, asking for a job.

Once hired, Carstarphen worked everyday for 10 years. He saw it as something he could do for the rest of his life. “It was fun. It was simple. And I love doing it,” he said.

Robinson and Carstarphen have been in business two and a half years. They went from having 12 vaults and one truck, buying boxes wholesale, to mixing cement and molding the vaults in their 30,000 square foot warehouse on South Miles Road in Cleveland.

They even brought in Ahmed Roberts, Robison’s cousin, who does whatever is needed from accounting to working on the website and branding. “We came along ways,” said Carstarphen.

Right now, they have two full time and two part time employees, but easily can remember when it was just the two of them, sometimes selling headstones while covered in cement.

Today, between the two companies, they provide standard and oversized vaults as well and vaults for babies.

When it comes to the burial vaults, they only service funeral homes, since most cemeteries require them. Caskets are placed inside to prevent them from sinking into the ground.

They also provide any kind of headstone that meets cemetery requirements including custom designs and different colors of granite from light gray to pearl blue.

With the monuments, Robinson, who heads that division, tries to lessen the strain on families with better prices. From having to bury his mother, he knows prices could be ridiculous. Customers can pre-pay for headstones as well.

Robinson said that since they've been in business, the response has been beautiful.

"We've been blessed. It's been a process but we have all satisfied customers," he said.

They serve a fair majority of the Black owned funeral homes in the Cleveland area.

"It's like a ministry also," added Robinson, who enjoys comforting families during their time of need. "I love what I do."

Robinson is from the inner-city of Cleveland. He grew up in Garden Valley and graduated from South High School
. He went on to acquire a Bachelor's degree in Education from the
University of Akron
and is a proud member of Omega Psi Phi.

He is also a deacon at Balm in Gilead Missionary Baptist Church.

When asked what sets them apart for others, Robinson said they are "Johnny on the spot" and their "prices are competitive." He said their service is commendable as well.

“We take on no challenge we can’t meet,” said Carstarphen, speaking to their integrity.

These days, they have a lot of ideas, but are staying focused on growing the vault and monument companies. There are about four vault companies in the area. Because the others are backed by corporations, RC Vaults is the leading independent company.

They are also members of the African American Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association. “I knew… if given the opportunity, this is the right business for me,” said Carstarphen. “Everything is possible through God.”

To learn more about RC Vaults and R&C Monuments call (216) 587-4999 or visit rcvaults.com and rcmonuments.com