

Nathan G. Conyers, History Maker

Nathan G. Conyers, President and Founder of Conyers-Riverside Ford in Detroit, is a history maker. “A *History Maker, African American by Descent*, is a person: who by his/her own accomplishments has made significant strides; and/or, who is associated with a particular movement, organization or association, and event or time that is important to the African American community” (The History Makers, About Us). Mr. Conyers has received numerous awards including: Outstanding Business Leader 2000, North American Customer Excellence Award 1998, and *Black Enterprises* 1995 Auto Dealer of the Year.

Conyers Riverside-Ford is the oldest African American Ford dealership in the country. It has been recognized by the Ford Motor Company with the coveted North American Customer Excellence Award. Also in 2000, Conyers was awarded a Jaguar Motorcar franchise, only the second black-owned Jaguar franchise in the company’s history.

In the late 1960s, major metropolitan areas such as Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit were racked with violence and racial unrest. Businesses were fleeing black neighborhoods. At this time, Ford Motor Company made a decision to “get more black auto dealers on board”.

Enter the Conyers family. With financing support from Ford, John Conyers Sr. along with his sons John Jr. and Nathan, was able to fulfill a lifelong dream of owning a family business by investing in a Ford franchise.

John Conyers Sr. had worked for Chrysler for many years. Nathan was a partner in a law firm but left it to join his father as President of Conyers Riverside Ford in 1970. Eventually John Sr.’s five children joined the dealership, holding a variety of jobs. (The dealership is located near the Detroit River, close to the center of the city).

Riding the peaks and valleys of auto sales hasn’t been easy. Many African-American owned businesses in African American neighborhoods have failed. A Ford spokesman believes that “Conyers endured by knowing his market, being a hands-on manager and changing with the times”.

Initially his customers were African-Americans who knew the Conyers family. Whites would visit the dealership, look around, and buy their Fords elsewhere. Nathan’s response? “He hired more white sales staff and managers to “create a comfort level for any customer that comes in”. He aggressively marketed the service department to downtown office workers, figuring that if they trusted him to fix their cars, they’d eventually trust him to see them a new one. More than half of the dealership’s managers are white. All Conyers employees are constantly focused on customer satisfaction and cost control and are appraised accordingly. Both have been the driving forces behind change since the dealership began.

Nathan Conyers has resisted the temptation of moving the dealership to the wealthiest suburbs. Born and raised in Detroit (a city of about 80 percent African Americans), Nathan has a

strong commitment to his community, the city's economic viability, and "to do the right thing because it's the right thing to do. He helped establish the National Association of Minority Automobile dealers and served as its first president.