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N.J woman keeps alive slain husband's business effort to help others

Updated Oct 30, 2016;
Posted Oct 30, 2016



Gallery: Zakiyyah Flagg, CEO of Flagg Labor in Union

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By [Barry Carter | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

Zakiyyah Flagg had to "man up" -- and she had to do it fast.

The telephone calls from her husband's employees started coming a week after he was killed during a robbery in Newark.

The workers understood her grief, but life goes on and they needed to be paid.

[Joseph Flagg](#) had been the co-owner of Flagg World, a Newark company that hired mostly men -- many of whom were former inmates -- to do labor work at construction sites.

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Real Local News

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Zakiyyah was familiar with the business, one he had started with his brother before branching out on his own. Joseph had showed her the ropes, how to do payroll and so on. But for the most part, she was a stay-at-home mom, caring for their two small children. Joseph also had two children from a previous relationship.

"I was spoiled," she said. "I was a such a kept woman."

Until Oct. 27, 2013.

On that Sunday afternoon, three Newark teenagers shot and killed Joseph, 41, as they attempted to rob a deli he owned on Chancellor Avenue.

Zakiyyah suddenly needed to be able to support herself and was forced to dive into a male-dominated industry, carving her path under a new name -- Flagg Labor. The company is now based in Union and has continued to hire former inmates and others looking for work.

"I had to make it happen," she said.

Three years later, the employees give her a thumbs-up. General contractors do, too.

Steve Peragallo, senior project manager for Racanelli Construction in Mellville, N.Y., said Zakiyyah is as reliable as her husband when he needs workers on his jobs.

"She's extremely professional," Peragallo said. "I was pleased that she took it on, and even more pleased to see that she handles it as well she does."

Zakiyyah said she was scared when she first took over the operation, particularly because she was unsure of how to find workers for contractors who reached out to her.

Her husband knew where to go. He'd find day laborers on the corner. He also had friends who were getting out of prison and needed work, and he had contacts with halfway houses. She started out on Craig's List, advertised on employment websites and stayed in touch with laborers who worked with her husband.

His childhood friend, Tayshawn Howard, was in her corner from day one. He said Joseph saved him from the streets when he started the labor support company in 2004.

"That was my man," said Howard, who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

After Joseph's death, Howard said he stayed with the company because working for Zakiyyah is just like working for her husband. They're both about business and getting the job done.

"She's a carbon copy of Joe," Howard said. "It's like he's not even gone. His spirit is with her."

Her style, though, is different.

Joseph picked up the men from halfway houses where they lived, drove them to work sites and delivered their checks on payday.

Zakiyyah networks by phone and mails the paychecks, because she's also busy raising their children, who are now 7 and 8 years old.

She has maintained accounts that Joseph had with general contractors and also developed new ones. When jobs are available, she reaches out to the workers by phone, letting them know where the sites are located.

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"We (guys) say she is like Charlie from 'Charlie's Angels,' " said Rashaun Rice, of Hempstead, N.Y. "You just hear her on the phone and then she pops up on a job site."

Rice has been with the company two years and heard the stories about Joseph Flagg from other workers. He said he's grateful to the man he never met -- and to his wife, for continuing his legacy.

Joseph Flagg's death hit the community hard. He was a family man, the breadwinner; a man who hired Newark residents.

He didn't have to open his deli on the day he died. He did it because there was a football game and he wanted to feed the crowd passing by the store.

"He was a giver," Zakiyyah said. "Why would you want to kill someone who gave so much?"

Joseph held toy drives and fed the homeless. During the 10 months that he had the deli, Joseph allowed the [Weequahic High School](#) cheerleaders to use the parking lot for car

wash fundraisers. His goal, Zakiyyah said, was to eventually hire students to work in the deli after school.

But Joseph was best known for giving ex-offenders a second chance. He could relate -- because he had been one. He started the labor company a year after he was released from prison.

Zakiyyah has a soft spot for these men, too.

"They need a shot," she said. "Joe's philosophy around that was, when you get out and if nobody is going to give you a job, then you damn near almost have to do a crime."

The legacy her husband left is lasting.

Another year has passed -- Thursday was the third anniversary of Joseph's death.

Zakiyyah has only visited the deli once; it was in the first year after Joseph died. She placed a candle out front, walked around inside but hasn't been back.

She has learned to cope with the loss while waiting for the trials of two of the teenagers who were charged as adults in Joseph's killing. The third teen was sentenced to 10 years as a juvenile.

She hopes they will be over soon.

"As much as I love him and I miss him, I don't want to be sad and mourn him forever," Zakiyyah Flagg said.

She's only looking forward, just as Joseph would want her to.

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