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Information services firm supports top-level security needs

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ARLINGTON, Va. – Aqiwo means “star” or “light” in the Chumash language. It is also the name of Stephen Mills’ company. And like a shining star, his knack for technology and ambition has made his a Native-owned business success story.

Aqiwo currently provides complex services that secure computer systems used by intelligence, defense and civilian government agencies.

Mills, a Chumash Native, formed the company in 2002. It was born out of a subcontract he was awarded from Cherokee Information Services. He had been contracting for the company on a rotation basis for about two years before venturing off on his own.

“At that point, I was able to gain some ground and capability,” he said.

In retrospect, his college education does not reflect the high level of technology his company delves into on a daily basis. He holds a bachelor’s degree in political science and a Master of Business Administration. Yet, his jobs over the

years have led him toward the information technology field.

Today, those past experiences have prepared him and his company to take on contracts that protect the United States by keeping critical computer systems secure from would-be hackers and allowing the free flow of information between government agencies.

Mills, 39, said one of the biggest contracts that his company has taken on is with the Department of Homeland Security’s National Counterterrorism Center in Virginia. His consultants that work with the agency must pass a polygraph test to earn top-secret clearance to enter the highly secured facility.

“It’s something that is keeping our nation secure and I am very proud of the work we are doing over there,” he said.

Aqiwo has also helped to secure the BIA’s public-access Web site by eliminating potential access to sensitive files and other possible security breaches. A major part of the job came with the challenge of having to design 1,700 new computers and distribute them to BIA and tribal offices throughout the United States.

The mission was successful, and Aqiwo has provided ongoing technological support to the agency.

In the information technology field, there are certain qualifications a company must possess in order to land government contracts. Stephanie Sipek, operations manager, said that Aqiwo is able to receive government bids through a system called “contract vehicles.” In essence, contract vehicles verify that a company is an expert in a certain area.

For example, Aqiwo is certified by the U.S. General Services Administration’s IT Schedule 70. A government agency can check that Web site to see what company is qualified to carry out certain types of jobs and draw up a proposal from there.

“We’re an up and coming company and we’re doing some interesting work,” Sipek said.

The company also belongs to the Small Business Administration’s 8(a) business development program. This program gives minority small-business owners an advantage in garnering contracts from federal agencies.

“It’s a great opportunity for Indian-owned businesses to do work with the government,” Mills said.

Aqiwo also has provided services to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the Defense Logistics Agency and the Director of National Intelligence.

The company currently employs about 34 workers. Mills said that his personal and professional goals entail giving back to Indian country as much as possible.

He said that his company is always looking for qualified Native employees. He also likes to share his success story at Native business conferences and with young people. “I want to continue to grow the company and make it an example of what a Native American-owned company can really become, and share in the wealth,” he said.

In 2005, Open Ratings (now D&B) certified Aqiwo as a top 20 percent performer when compared with similar companies and based on past performance evaluation surveys filled out by its customers. To learn more about the company’s services, visit www.aqiwo.com. **ICT**