

Hooper: TIA restaurateur lifts himself up, and others



George Tinsley Sr.'s company is the majority partner in the TGI Friday's in the main terminal of Tampa International Airport. EVE EDELHEIT | Times

By [Ernest Hooper](#)

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As a child, George Tinsley, Sr., sported such an optimistic outlook that folks in his impoverished Louisville, Ky., neighborhood, known as Smoketown by locals, looked out for him.

An elderly woman, an amputee with only one leg, adopted Tinsley as a 7-month-old and raised him in a 10- by 10-foot room with no running water. The struggles were ever-present, including wearing the same clothes for five or six days and sharing a bed with someone until he went to college. But his pride and hope never dimmed.

People noticed.

A teacher who spotted him ducking into the gym during lunch — he was embarrassed to use his free lunch tickets — began bringing him apples. Ministers and other neighborhood moms offered guidance. As he grew into a promising basketball player, pimps and prostitutes steered him away from trouble.

"There was a big prostitution house right across the street from me," Tinsley said. "I would walk across the street and they would say you better get back across the street. You're going to be somebody."

Everyone seemed to recognize the good in him. It helped that he was willing to accept "their favor" as he blossomed into a 6-foot-5 prospect and moved on to Kentucky Wesleyan College. His constant smile inspired the village to raise him up.

"I've always been a very positive person," said Tinsley, who went on to play in the old American Basketball Association. "Mama taught me to believe in faith and God and things will work out if you treat people the way you want to be treated. That there's always a silver lining in the dark cloud."

The positive outlook remains for the successful restaurateur. In partnership with his wife, Seretha, and a son and daughter, he has spent 20 years overseeing several restaurants at Tampa International Airport — as well as other business ventures — and currently manages 45 percent of the airport revenues as a partner of HMSHost.

Now, as he's bidding to become one of the "prime" winners in the airport's concession remake, he latches on to the same hope that helped him rise from the streets.

The Hillsborough County Aviation Authority, whose members oversee the airport, will vote in June to decide what the new concessions lineup will look like when TIA's \$943 million construction project is finished around 2017.

An airport selection committee ranked proposals made by Tinsley and other partners who teamed to bid on 13 different packages created by the airport. As a minority partner in other bids, Tinsley appears to be in position to continue doing business at the airport. But his hope is to be a prime or lead company on the quick-service package.

The committee ranked his prime bid second, but Tinsley touts the fact that his company, based in Winter Haven, is 100 percent local and all the revenue generated will stay in the Tampa Bay area.

Tinsley also notes that the Airport Concession Disadvantaged Business Enterprise program is designed to help promote minority businesses into a role in which it can be a lead on such a package.

To be clear, Tinsley's bid is about more than just financial goals. Just as people from his neighborhood helped him, he has always looked to help others — and success at this level would be another step. A longtime franchisee for KFC, he could point to his original store in Auburndale — he sold his other KFC franchises as he moved more into the airport business — as a sort of Tinsley College, because so many employees have gone on to success since he opened it in 1986.

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He thinks that becoming a lead would send a signal to other minority vendors that true success can come from hard work and doing the right thing.

As a former basketball player, he says the process is in the fourth quarter. It'll be interesting to see if he can score the winning shot, for himself and for the village that helped him get here.

That's all I'm saying.



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