The one thing I learned from both of them is that if people don't like you, they won't buy your product no matter what you're selling.

While competitive pressures and a weakening customer base have decimated the ranks of independent black-owned insurance companies nationwide, Cleveland-based Pinkney-Perry Insurance Agency Inc. is poised for growth, kicking off 2013 with a move to the Leader Building in downtown Cleveland.

Founded in 1961 by Arnold R. Pinkney and Charles B. Perry, the insurance and financial services firm is the oldest and largest minority owned insurance agency in the state of Ohio. From humble beginnings of primarily selling home owners, auto and life insurance, Pinkney-Perry has evolved into one of the area's premier business insurance agencies, specializing primarily in commercial insurance and employee benefits for companies of all sizes.

A corporation operated by the Perry family and other stakeholders, the Perry's say that after nearly 40 years on Stokes Boulevard, the move is indicative of the company's pledge to the

city's economic landscape and its strategy for growth.

Here's an inside look at Pinkney-Perry Insurance Agency:

Q Pinkney-Perry Insurance Agency began in June of 1961 with a partnership between Arnold R. Pinkney and Charles B. Perry. What was your vision behind forming Pinkney-Perry?

Charles Perry: We both were selling insurance on a part time basis and when we came together to discuss forming a partnership, we talked about how there was a void in the community as it related to insurance. In the early to mid 20th century, the only insurance that was available to African Americans were substandard and seriously inferior life insurance products. Known as industrial or monthly debit policies, they had little value. We knew we could provide a better service to the community and we did. We started the business selling life, casualty and home insurance, and we also wrote bail bonds.

Q The firm has a rich history in Cleveland – how did that occur?

Charles Perry: When we started the business we did not have the money to join a country club or hire a marketing firm, so we had to figure out a way to entrench ourselves in the community. When Bill Boyd retired from the Cleveland School Board, Arnold Pinkney successfully became a board member and our civic involvement began.

Q The Company has gone through wars, the civil rights movement and other historical events. What is the most memorable event in your company's history that you can recall?

Charles Perry: Witnessing an African American president elected to run this country office for the first time was the most memorable event since we started the company.

Q What is the mission and vision of the firm?

Richard Perry: Our mission is to provide the highest level of service to our clients and be proactive advocates for them. At all times we strive to be reputable and positive role models within our industry and community.

Q What was the environment like for African-American entrepreneurs in 1961? Did you have difficulty selling insurance?

Charles Perry: The environment was rough. However struggles during the civil rights era forced African-Americans to come together. For instance, when a group of African-American doctors came together to launch a practice in a medical building, or when other African-American businesses like funeral homes needed insurance, we were called on to write those insurance policies. There was closeness in our community at the time that doesn't exist today.

Q What type of road blocks did you face?

Charles Perry: What we faced was not outside of the norm for African American business owners. We were unable to borrow money and unable to represent certain companies.

Q Did African- Americans automatically come to Pinkney-Perry to purchase insurance?

Charles Perry: We had two advantages. Soon after we started, we quickly became a household name within the African American community. Metropolitan was the big insurance company at the time. But when people began buying homes and changing neighborhoods, we were able to get many referrals because we partnered with real estate brokers.

Q When did you start working for the company?
Richard Perry: I officially joined the company in 1987 after graduating from Central State University in Wilberforce Ohio. But a year before I graduated, I started selling Progressive auto insurance to students on campus and in the area.

Nick Perry: I started in 1999 after working for a pharmaceuticals company. I left four years later to start an appraisal company, but I returned in 2005.

Q Since you retired, what role do you play in the firm?
Charles Perry: Sales and Counsel

Q When did you begin to groom Richard to run the firm?

Charles Perry: Contrary to popular belief, I didn't groom him to run the firm. It was a progress type of thing. We would watch television when he was younger and there would be certain things on television and I would ask him questions as it related to insurance. For instance if there was an accident, I would ask him how it was covered just to see what his interest level was. And while he was attending Central State, I saw an opportunity where he could earn some extra money, maybe help with his tuition by selling insurance to the students driving on campus. I didn't force him to decide if he wanted to be in the insurance business. He expressed an interest.

Charles Perry: When Richard got married and was debating whether to move to Detroit to work for Ford, I approached his wife and said, “Does he have an opportunity to be the president of Ford Motor Company, because he has the opportunity to become the president of Pinkney Perry.”

Q What has been the biggest challenge in running the business?

Richard Perry: I am challenged with getting employees and leaders of the community to understand and respect my vision and our current transition. It’s not easy following prior leadership of great men like Charles Perry, Arnold Pinkney and Ted Dixson. Our company is also affiliated with historical Cleveland figures such as George Forbes and Congressman Louis Stokes.

Q Nick- what is your role with the company?

Nick Perry: I sell policies and handle the nonprofit part of the business. I am an account manager and I play a crucial role where I am the claims manager. The smaller and midsize agencies file a claim and move on. I facilitate the process. If it’s a difficult liability claim I come and fill that gap and help the customer through the process. But it is a small business so we all wear different hats.

Richard Perry: Nick makes sure that the claim is settled to our customer’s satisfaction.

Q What are the challenges and benefits of running a family business?

Richard Perry: Sometimes it’s difficult to separate what’s going in the family from what’s happening in the business. You’ve got to shake it off and come in. Two years ago, my mother passed and it wiped my brother, father and I out. She passed on a Thursday and payday was the next day and although I’m sure that the employees were saddened by the passing of our mother they still needed to get paid. I had to put aside my personal state of affairs and make sure the employees were paid. It’s making the distinction between, loving your family, and doing

what's best for the company.

Charles Perry: We need to clarify something. This is a corporation that is operated by family members. There are officers in the company who are not family members. We have stake holders who are not family. Family members run the corporation, but it's not a family business.

Richard Perry: From a historical perspective, it's a blessing to work in a business that has sustained us while we were growing up and now sustains our families and the families that work here.

Q What has been one of your proudest moments?

Charles Perry: It's great to have something to pass on to your children and hopefully our grandchildren.

Nick Perry: I'm just as proud to come to work now in the family business as I was when I was a young elementary school student happy knowing that my family owned a business. I'll never forget that feeling of pointing out the family name on the building to all of the kids on the school bus as we passed the building in route to a field trip.

Richard Perry: It's been great to come out of the shadows in many ways. I was proud when the company was able to facilitate a deal with Arnold Pinkney when he retired. And I was also proud of the first time I was able to get two non African American-owned companies to let Pinkney-Perry insure their businesses. At the time we secured Dave's Supermarket and the Brown Derby as clients, brokering those types of deals were truly a rarity.

Q How long have you operated on Stokes Blvd/Fairhill and why are you moving?

Richard Perry: We have been here for almost 40 years and it's time for us to look toward the future as we consider where we want this company to be in the next 50 years. We are going to

get back to our core focus of selling insurance and we're happy that University Circle Inc. has some great development plans for this area.

Q What is your relationship with University Circle Inc?

Richard Perry: We have a very good and strong relationship. UCI has been very patient and vigilant in helping us to reach a deal that was mutually beneficial for both of our organizations.

Q Are you parting on amicable terms?

Richard Perry: Absolutely

Q Who are your customers?

Nick Perry: We are a commercial property causality and employee benefits insurance agency. That's our specialty. Our customers include non profits as well as a large public sector. Clients range from apartment buildings, day care facilities, alcohol and drug facilities to churches and funeral homes.

Charles Perry: We changed our focus when the direct writers- companies like Nationwide and State Farm - began to hire more black people and we were no longer competitive with homeowners and auto policies. We moved to the commercial end of business and we've been quite successful.

Q Where do you attract most of your new customers?

Nick Perry: We get referrals from both customers and other insurance agencies because we are a niche agency, but we also get clients come from cold-call selling.

Q What will change and what will stay the same as you transition to downtown Cleveland?

Richard Perry: We are going to have a bigger marketing/advertising presence and we hope to expand outside of the Cleveland market. We're considering getting back involved in the homeowner/ auto market place, but perhaps under a different brand.

Nick Perry: Throughout the agencies we have increased technology so you will see a more interactive website and more social marketing. We will keep our personal service consistent with our customers.

Q What is the advantage of operating the firm in downtown Cleveland?

Nick Perry: Being downtown we'll be in the heart of the city. It wouldn't feel right to work in a suburb. We'll have access to new clients and a new environment. It's almost like a rebirth for us.

Richard Perry: It's a little scary, but exciting. We will be a part of the revitalization.
Charles Perry: Moving downtown will be a different experience for me, because 50 years ago when we were looking for a building, we weren't allowed to go into the Leader Building.

Q **How important is it to you to keep the firm in Cleveland?**

Richard Perry: We considered options of possibly moving to Warrensville or Shaker Heights.

But after we analyzed our customer base and considered who we are, where we've been and where we want to go, it just made sense to stay in Cleveland. Downtown is coming back. A lot of insurance brokerage firms and companies are moving back to downtown and we want to be part of the new development. Hopefully it's going to offer us some new opportunities.

Charles Perry: Historically in our community, there were no black businesses besides funeral homes and churches that had their own buildings on the street.

Q How does your employees feel about the move?

Richard Perry: We have 12 employees, and except for some concerns about parking, they're all excited about the move. We expect to hire up to five more people in the next two to five years.

Q How important is the support of the community to the company as you transition to your new location in downtown Cleveland?

Richard Perry: If we don't get community support, we are in trouble. We've been fortunate in getting community support and now we're looking to build upon that with more development opportunities.

Nick Perry: I think the community also needs to know that Pinkney-Perry is still here. We've weathered many storms and we're still growing.

Charles Perry: We have been strong contributors to the growth of the Cleveland community. Similar to our white counterparts who have served on various boards and held civic positions, we too have progressed and involved ourselves in the community in a similar fashion.

Q What can customers expect as far as service?

Richard Perry: They can expect the same great service that we've always taken pride in delivering. Anyone can sell an insurance policy, but we go out of our way to provide great service in a positive atmosphere.

Q Do you have plans for expansion?

Richard Perry: Over the next two to three years we plan to strategically open up offices in a couple of cities where we are currently doing business. As technology continues to evolve and new markets are introduced, there are always opportunities to discover new ways to sell insurance.

Q What is your formula for creating a sustainable and successful company in a difficult economy?

Richard Perry: Persistence is critical. Throughout the years, there have been many times when we faced difficult times. When the economy is tough, people tend to cut out insurance, and you lose some customers. That's when we make adjustments in order to remain profitable. Throughout the years we've had to cut back expenses and even lay off people. But at the end of the day, we work harder on sales. The thought is, "If we need more, sell more."

Q How have the founders inspired you and what you do?

Richard Perry: There is seldom a time when I'm faced with a challenge that I don't ask myself, "What would Pinkney and my father do? Or how would they handle this situation?" I feel blessed that they are both still available to give me counsel. Their story about the way they came together is an inspiration to me. It makes me want to take the business to another level with revenues and employees. That's important. That's part of our mission.

Nick Perry: The one thing I learned from both of them is that if people don't like you, they won't buy your product no matter what you're selling. My father and godfather, Pinkney have distinctly different personalities and approaches to doing business. I incorporate what I've learned from both of them. Pinkney used to take me to political meetings while my father would take me to insurance meetings. When you become a Pinkney -Perry customer, we do everything we can to keep your business. Just as we run our business as a family, we try to treat our customers like family.

Q What are you thankful for in this season of giving and reflecting?

Charles Perry: Life, love, health and the ability to survive.
Nick Perry: Family stability, longevity
Richard Perry: I appreciate the groundwork that's been laid, and having the baton passed onto me that I will be able to pass on to the next generation.

Q Charles - What are some words of wisdom that you would give someone just starting a business?
Charles Perry: 1. Know your product. 2. Have patience and strength in your commitment. 3. Have a strong faith and belief in God