

# Brame Leaves Big Footprint

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GRAND RAPIDS — Kenyatta Brame knows the law and he knows business.

And Cascade Engineering Inc.'s vice president of business services knows several dozen children in an orphanage in Honduras.

That's where Brame spent his Christmas vacation, as he has done for years, supervising a group of about 40 8- and 9-year-old boys who keep him humble, grateful and inspired.

"They've all had different — some of them, horrible — experiences, but to see kids that are so positive about life regardless of what happened to them and so positive about the future, it makes me realize there's nothing I can't do," Brame said.

"They've got a positive outlook on life, and there's no reason I can't have a positive outlook on life, too."

Brame joined Cascade Engineering last fall after several years at Sysco Food Services Inc. At Cascade Engineering, which has 1,200 employees and 13 facilities worldwide, Brame supervises human resources, information technology and safety, and provides legal services.

"When I first met (Cascade Engineering Chairman and CEO) Fred Keller, he talked about the three most important things for this company: obviously, the people; how this company affects the planet; and then, prosperity for the company. And to me that was mind-boggling, because in most organizations the bottom line is the prosperity; it's about making the money," Brame said.

"In this organization, we're saying making money is important — that allows us all to have jobs — but equally important are how you treat your people, and the impact, the footprint you leave on the world. That's my personal belief, and to find a company that aligns with my personal belief, that's just the best thing ever."

Cascade Engineering has a reputation as a leader in technology, Brame said, and he's happy to have that department under his umbrella.

"We think that our technology is actually a competitive advantage for us," he said. "It allows us to respond faster, it allows us to be cost competitive ... and it provides a quality product to our customers."

Brame said he's also inherited a safety department that is committed to the work environment.

"Last (month) we were given the Rising Star award from MIOSHA, which recognizes our success in safety and which characterizes us as one of the leading companies in the state of Michigan, so we're very proud of that," he said.

Brame's move into the business world followed years of working in employment law for Miller Johnson.

"I practiced law and I really enjoyed it. But what I loved the most about the law was supporting employers," he said.



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Kenyatta Brame's world perspective also includes a two-week trip each year to a Honduran orphanage.

“Sometimes as an attorney, you’re often brought in because you’re dealing with someone’s nightmare. Something bad has happened to someone and you come in and you have to try to fix it. And I got a better feeling when I was able to work with clients to help them develop programs and processes to make the workplace a better place for them.”

Brame graduated from Grand Rapids City High School, earned a bachelor’s degree in political science and psychology from Wabash College in Indiana, and then a law degree from the University of Michigan. Last month, he received an MBA from Michigan State University.

## BRIEFLY

**Name:** Kenyatta Brame

**Company:** Cascade Engineering, Inc.

**Position:** Vice President, Business Services

**Age:** 36

**Birthplace:** Kansas City, MO

**Family:** Wife, Tracey; son, Kamau, 6 months

**Community/Business Involvement:** Grand Rapids Art Museum, Omega Psi Phi fraternity, Alternative Directions

**Biggest Career Break:** Being recruited by Miller Johnson Snell & Cumiskey as a labor attorney

He is the globe-trotting son of Grand Rapids community leader Walter Brame. His parents gave him the adopted name of the first elected president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta.

Brame’s travels first took him as an undergraduate student to the University of Nairobi in Kenya, where he studied political science and Swahili. The country was in the midst of moving away from a one-party system, stirring up much debate, discussion and passion that Brame said he enjoyed. He discovered his fellow students took their studies quite seriously, because they viewed college as the opportunity to pull their entire families out of poverty.

“When I was in Kenya, I’d never seen poverty like that before,” he said. “Seeing that once again opened my eyes to the opportunity, and I think you really appreciate what we have as Americans. ... That makes me appreciate what I have and also makes me work as hard as I do.”

During a break from law school, Brame went to work in the Honduran orphanage that would become so important in his life.

“It was a great experience for me,” Brame said. “I went down there not speaking Spanish very well. I got to the orphanage and they gave me 40 boys and said, ‘Here, you’re in charge of this group.’ Here in the States I thought I was smart, I thought I could do everything, and I get down there and I’ve got these kids and I’m at their mercy.

“I was like a house mother. I helped them get through their day, I helped them study. I gave them a consistent person in their life. And a lot of these kids had never had that. And I think that’s the reason that I go back there every year, because when I was there, I made a commitment to them.”

That first group of boys has grown up, some attending medical school or law school, and some now have families of their own, said Brame, who returns to the orphanage at Christmas time to give the staff an opportunity to celebrate the holidays with their own families. But there is always a new group of boys to fill the beds.

“For the two weeks that I’m down there, they give me a group and I do what I did when I was originally down there: get them up in the morning, help them get dressed, go through breakfast, do your chores. ... That’s how I spend most of my day, tagging along, making sure things are going well and just spending some quality time with the kids.”

Brame said he never lacked oversight while growing up in Grand Rapids as the eldest of “the Brame boys.” His father has been president and CEO of the Grand Rapids Urban League for 17 years and has taught at Grand Valley State University, Western Michigan University and Grand Rapids Community College. With a well-known father who holds a doctorate degree and a mother who is a lawyer, Brame said expectations were high for him.

“People ... knew that I was one of the Brame boys and they knew who my father was, and so I couldn’t be one of the kids that was hanging out doing nothing because someone would tell my dad,” he said.

“My mom’s a lawyer and a nurse, and my dad’s a Ph.D., so I had excellent role models to say, ‘You can be a professional; you can be something successful.’ There was no question in my household: Are you going to college? No issue; I’m going to go to college. You’re going to do well in school? There was no issue; you’re going to do well in school. The standards being set high for me have allowed me to succeed, and I credit both my parents for that.”

Brame’s wife, Tracey, teaches at Cooley Law School. They met on the University of Michigan campus on their first day of law school. The couple’s son, Kamau, is just 6 months old and is also named after Kenya’s first president. Brame said he hopes to set high standards for Kamau as his own father did for him.

“I’m in a place where I can make an impact, not only on Cascade (Engineering), but, hopefully, I can make an impact on Grand Rapids and an impact on other companies,” Brame said.

“I hope that people five years from now will look back at everything I’ve done and say, ‘You know what? We want to be just like Cascade and Kenyatta.’” **BJX**

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