



Symposium empowers African-American executives

by Sonya M. Toler
Courier Staff Writer

Every year, the African American Executive Alliance Symposium gets better.

The day-long seminar is for corporate Pittsburgh's crop of young leaders.

This year's event, Nov. 5 at the I.B.E.W. Hall on the South Side, marked the largest attendance in its three-year history and was jam-packed with informative speakers and networking opportunities.

The highlight of the event was a morning keynote presentation by master networker George C. Fraser, president of SuccessSource Unlimited and publisher of "SuccessGuide: The Networking Guide to Black Resources."

"George Fraser was awesome," said Carol Washington, "He was on fire. He gave it to you raw and you felt like you were in church."

Washington works with the Manchester-based Neighborhood Centers Association. This was the first year she attended the symposium, and she says she intends to return.

Another favorite was luncheon speaker Audrey Murrell, a member of the faculty of the Katz Graduate School of Business at the University of Pittsburgh, who spoke about mentoring in the workplace and community.

Speaking on the topic of leadership challenges and issues in the workplace was Roderick Craighead Jr., manager of Diversity and Affirmative Action Corporate Workforce Initiatives at Highmark.

Bomani Howze, a public school teacher who says he's in a career transition, was among the nearly 100 attendees taking copious notes throughout the day.

He was inspired by the idea of the symposium being started and planned by African-Americans in order to empower other African-Americans.

"Every session had something in it," he said, "but the most prolific part was the generational gaps there are for young people to be embraced."

After lunch, the attendees shared an open exchange about diversity and career advancement issues, followed by a CEO panel that included R. Yvonne Campos, Campos Market Research, Inc.; L. Patrick Hassey, Allegheny Technologies; Kenneth Melani, Highmark; and James Rohr, The PNC Financial Services Group.

The panel, facilitated by Renée Frazier, senior vice president and executive officer diversity and executive officer with VHA Pennsylvania, discussed diversity from a leadership perspective.

Hassey said the ruling thought has been "you promote who you know. So the challenge is to promote who you don't know."

Rohr personally travels to Historically Black Colleges and Universities to recruit candidates.

He said, "If you don't recruit and you don't retain, then you don't have anyone to promote."

Campos, a women's rights advocate, summed up the issue of diversity in the region saying, "this is one of the worse communities for diversity and inclusion in the country."

Her comments evoked applause.

"It's wonderful to hear that some people are doing some things," she continued. "But I will tell you it's not where it should be."

Washington said she'd liked to see at least one African-American CEO next year.

"How do we know who they are if we never meet them," she said.

Howze said next year, he hopes the symposium will include concrete opportunities.

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"I'm tired of symposiums and forums about the issues...It's talk. We need opportunities," he said, however, he appreciated the opportunity to network with other professionals.

The African American Executive Alliance of Pittsburgh is built on the premise that exposure to the proper experiences and information will help the next wave of business leaders succeed.

Closing remarks came from attorney Jim Diggs African American Executive Alliance member and senior vice president and general counsel and secretary at PPG Industries, Inc.

"It's truly about you," he told the young audience. "Today you heard a lot of information and, actually, there was a significant degree of passion. I would ask you to apply that passion to what you're doing. If you're passionate about your career, you'll be successful."

The African American Executive Alliance is made up of some of the leading Black executives in the region.

(Send comments to stoler@newpittsburghcourier.com.)