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First Fellows class makes lifelong connections

Goal is to retain black execs

By Alvin A. Reid

Of the St. Louis American

The inaugural class of the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative Fellows Program celebrated completion of its one-year program last Thursday at the Sheldon and left with new friendships and business relationships that could help keep them in the region.



One of only two such Fellows programs in the nation, it was created "as a strategic tool to assist with the retention of minority executives in the country," according to Valerie Patton SLBDI executive director.

"We are excited about the growth and development that our first class of participants has experienced," she said.

Fellows attend workshops and meetings with some of the area's highest-profile executives, who share their insight on development, relationship-building and civic engagement.

Dawn Higgins of Nestle Purina's PetCare division said, "I've been able to build relationships that will be lifelong."

"The partnership network we've developed has been outstanding," said Demetrius Grooms of Edward Jones.

"It centers around us giving back to the community."

This year's class included 20 fellows from 15 Civic Progress companies. The 2008-09 class will have 30 fellows from 25 Civic Progress companies and five from other regional firms.

Doug Koch, Brown Shoe Company chairman and Fellows Advisory Group member, said the program was created to address "a problem."

"(This region) is not perceived as a good place for African Americans to come to work," Koch said.

"The Fellowship Initiative attempts to set up good training and networking so that once someone comes here they are not left alone."

Brian K. Leonard of Ameren said he would leave Fellows workshops or networking sessions "with a sense I couldn't wait to come back again."

Tim McClure, Macy's director of merchandise planning, said he took what he learned with the Fellows program "and applied it on the job, making me a more valuable employee and mentor."

The Fellows are selected and recommended by participating corporations.

The corporate participants for the inaugural class were Smurfit Stone, A.G. Edwards, Emerson, BJC Behavioral Health, Macy's Brown Shoe, Edward Jones, BJC Christian Northeast Hospital, Nestle Purina PetCare, Monsanto, Ameren, Laclede Gas, Solutia, BJC St. Louis Children's Hospital, Enterprise Rent-A-Car and Bank of America.

Patton said the support of those companies and Civic Progress "is vital to our success."

The workshops included sessions on "Personal Leadership Brand," "Mastering Skill for Conflict Resolution" and "Diversity and the Workplace."

The celebration also included an informal discussion on career success and management skill with David Steward, founder and chair of World Wide Technology, and Priscilla L. Hill-Ardoin, retired senior vice president of AT&T Inc.

SIDEBAR

The 2006-07 St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative Fellows

Lorenzo Boyd, A.G. Edwards

Frederick K. Burdell III, Emerson

Reginald K. Farrar, BJC Behavioral Health

Courtney Gibson, Macy's

Geoff Green, Brown Shoe Company

Demetrius Grooms, Edward Jones

Deborah Hartwell, BJC Christian Northeast

Dawn Higgins, Nestle Purina PetCare

Shloe Wilson Jeffery, Monsanto

Brian K. Leonard Sr., Ameren

Ozzie Lomax, Ameren

Timothy McClure, Macy's

Jacquelyn Nicks, Laclede Gas Company

Bahi Okupa, Solutia

Cheryl Pettus, Monsanto

Kenneth Sowell, BJC St. Louis Children's Hospital

Andrea Smith, Enterprise Rent-A-Car

Michelle Tucker, Bank of America

Rodney White, Nestle Purina PetCare

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