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Gateway to success

Program helps minority professionals adjust to the Lou

By Meliqueica Meadows

Of the St. Louis American

With nearly \$5 billion in Downtown development planned and underway, the Gateway City is attracting young professionals from across the country. Gateway Connections is a program aimed at keeping them here and assisting with their transition to St. Louis.

Part of the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative, Gateway Connections was created through a partnership with the St. Louis Regional Chamber and Growth Association and FOCUS St. Louis. Through an information-packed one-day class, the program provides newly arrived minority professionals with social and cultural information about the local area. Classes meet only three times a year, but participants receive a wealth of information about the history, future and culture of the city.

"It's a one-day orientation geared to professionals of color who have relocated to the St. Louis region. It's free to the individuals that participate. Also, they can bring their spouses and significant others to the program as well," Valerie Patton, director of the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative, said.

"We give them a lot of information about St. Louis. We really want the people to be welcomed and engaged and to meet other professionals. As we all know, St. Louis is unfortunately a very closed, parochial community, so we build a different kind of network."

That unique network was important to Chris Tabourne, Corporate Diversity manager for Enterprise Rent-A-Car, who relocated to the city with his wife, Vikki, and their two young children less than a year ago.

Tabourne said that for the past few years the couple has been on the move following his career with Enterprise, first from Atlanta to New Jersey then finally to St. Louis. He said Gateway Connections helped his family settle into the community.

"Enterprise has been involved with the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative and, when I met Valerie, I thought it sounded like the program would be a good idea for us," Tabourne said.

"We had a very good first impression of the city. We like St. Louis a lot. I've been here a lot over the years. St. Louis is a very family-friendly."

Tabourne said the transition of the couple's two children, ages five and eight, was eased because of Gateway Connections. Through the program, Chris and his wife met another couple who lived in the University City neighborhood they were settling into. The other couple had children around the same ages of the Tabourne children.

"Gateway Connections provided us with the opportunity to begin friendships that we wouldn't have made. We also learned about the city, demographics and history of the city," Tabourne said.

"A program like Gateway Connections is important when you come to a new city because there are basics that you need to know for minorities, like where to go to get a haircut and places to eat. It also provides a unique networking opportunity where you can meet other minority professionals. Gateway Connections is a quick way to get connected."

To date, over 70 minority professionals have participated in the program, which celebrated its first anniversary this past June. Patton said she stays in contact with former participants and hopes to host an annual reunion event.

"The St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative also does another program called the Professional Development Speakers' Series about three times a year," Patton said. "At that series, we discuss strategies for leadership and making the right moves professionally. We always invite (Gateway Connections alumni) to participate in that."

Patton said that while it is important for minority professionals to network in a more mainstream environment, programs like Gateway Connections can help them celebrate the unique aspects of their own culture with other professionals from a similar background.

"This is passion work for me because if I relocated to another city, I would want somebody to embrace me. It's a labor of love, and I look forward to meeting the new people that are going to be in the class. I look forward to trying to get them pointed in the right direction," Patton said.

"Yes, I think we should be mainstreamed, and I think we have those opportunities to do that, but I do think there's something special about being around your own people. We do have cultural differences, and we do have things that are unique to our culture. I think that's okay and we should celebrate them."

The next Gateway Connections class will be held in March 2006. For more information, call the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative at (314) 444-1121 or visit www.stlbizdiversity.com.

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