

people to watch



Doris Carson Williams
makes the connections
for minority-owned
businesses.



TOM ALTANY

RENAISSANCE WOMAN

Doris Carson Williams
Executive Director
 African American Chamber of
 Commerce of Western
 Pennsylvania

Spurred by a flurry of development in stadiums, an expanded convention center and new retailers moving in, Doris Carson Williams says Pittsburgh's Renaissance III is right around the corner. But the first full-time executive director of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania is working to make sure that this Renaissance is different from the two previous ones.

"This time the Renaissance has to be inclusive," she says. "All sectors of the community need to benefit from it."

The African American Chamber hopes to link minority business owners to opportunities that the regional expansion brings. "We're called by a number of companies who want to hire minority-owned suppliers but don't know where to find them," Williams says. "And we get a range of requests—someone to do closed captioning or maybe an architect—and the good news is that we've been able to fill all of those requests."

The 49-year-old Manchester resident has been fielding a growing number of inquiries since joining the Chamber in October. Before that, the organization had been run on a volunteer basis. "Our president, Robert Agbade [see "People to Watch," June/July 1998], thought that the time was right for this position, and the board has been very supportive," Williams says. She draws upon her background as director for business enterprises at Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh and assistant vice president for Dollar Bank, and the contacts she made in those positions.

Williams also plays the role of facilitator, helping to build a consensus among legislators talking about minority-business requirements for Plan B projects. "Andrew Carn, Bill Robinson, Sala Udin and Mulu Birru had a two-hour discussion on the subject that was very constructive,"

she says. "The Chamber was able to act as a neutral site."

Like many Chambers, the organization offers its members health and life insurance, payroll services and disability plans. Those are important services, Williams says, if you're going to try to spur entrepreneurship, which has been lacking in the region as a whole, particularly in the African-American community.

"We strive to provide access and opportunities for companies of all sizes," Williams says, adding that she sees the possibility of more start-up businesses as companies have "right-sized," freeing up employees to begin their own firms. "The climate is right for it."

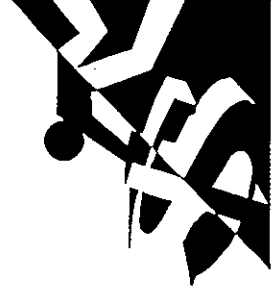
However, she notes the challenges that still exist, especially connecting minority-owned firms to the region's growing high-tech thrust.

She's hopeful that the Chamber can be a vehicle to make those connections, and Williams is going "door to door" visiting member-companies throughout the region. The calls serve two purposes. First, she introduces the Chamber and its approximately 150 members as possible suppliers and/or service providers. The second is to find out what these companies need.

"My job is about developing relationships and going out there and learning what opportunities are there," Williams says. "I try to act like a sponge and soak it all in. It helps to have some understanding of this region if we're going to improve things for businesses—and not just minority businesses."

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—Christopher Fletcher



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