

New Pittsburgh

AN EMERGING CITY WITH A NEW ECONOMY

FACES ON THE FRONT LINE

Growing the group

African American Chamber of Commerce leader a big recruiter

By Michael Kolber
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President of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, Doris Carson Williams, 50, has used her personality as much as her experience to grow the organization's membership from 50 to 300 in the nearly three years she has led it.

"It's a matter of timing and having the right messenger," Williams said.

In Williams, the chamber's board believes it has found the right messenger.

When she was hired to head the organization in 1998, Williams was the chamber's first full-time employee. Since then she has been involved in every aspect of the chamber's operation: organizing member mixers and lectures, distributing requests for proposals to her members and producing a membership directory that companies can use to find black-owned contractors.

Still, the chamber believes it has substantial work to do before it can claim to have accomplished its goal of having black-owned firms winning their share of contracts.

"We are not where we used to be, but we are also not where we ought to be," said Robert O. Agbede, the chamber's chairman and president of Advanced Technology Systems, a Blawnox engineering firm.

What gains the chamber has made have a lot to do with Williams. A Pittsburgh native and Manchester resident, Williams has used her lifetime of business contacts to grow her organization and seek out opportunities for her members.



Bill Wade/Post-Gazette

For 11 years before joining the chamber, Williams was director of business operations for the Carnegie Museums, and before that she worked at Dollar Bank for 10 years.

Williams said she always keeps membership applications with her and is quick to hand them out to prospective members.

Agbede also claims some credit for the board in Williams' success.

"One of the things that happens to most of these nonprofits is that we want to micromanage them," Agbede said. "I let her have the full range. We give her direction: 'Here's the road map, and let's go get it done.'"

Jan Lauer, senior program manager at the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, said the chamber had become an important player in building the region's minority business community.

"Doris has been amazingly effective in bringing people together and building that chamber in such a short period of time," said Lauer, who works with Williams on the Working Together Consortium and the Alliance for the Development of Construction Contractors.

But with a small number of successful black entrepreneurs in the city when Williams started, her current success might be unexpected.

"There were some skeptics and naysayers who didn't think this would work, but it has been a wonderful experience," Williams said.