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Nobody's apprentice...Kwame Jackson speaks at Chamber

by Deborah M. Todd
Courier Staff Writer

When Doris Carson Williams invited "Apprentice" runner up Kwame Jackson to be the guest speaker at the sixth annual meeting of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, she may not have known of the connection Jackson has to the area.

Jackson's grandparents came from the Fairwood/Ingram section of the region and his grandmother graduated from both Langley High School and the University of Pittsburgh.

While Jackson was well aware of his family history within the city, he made it a point to become acquainted with the business history of the region as well before delivering his keynote address May 19. Some of the facts he learned, such as 20 years of stagnant economic development in the region, were not encouraging for the future of the city. However, those very same facts made Pittsburgh one of the places that needed to hear his message the most.

Jackson told the crowd at the luncheon that they could determine the future of economic development in the region by creating business opportunities for themselves. He spoke of a Western Pennsylvania of the past where Blacks owned successful businesses as blacksmiths and craftsmen. He also said that once white competitors noticed the success of some Black businesses, they were excluded from many future projects.

"White businesses completely and effectively excluded Blacks from business ventures," said Jackson during his keynote address. "I wonder to what degree Black-owned businesses are included in large-scale projects even today."

It is this reason that Jackson feels the best way for Blacks in Pittsburgh and all over the country to improve their social and economic condition is through entrepreneurship. He lauds the creation of small businesses and the growth of existing Black businesses as essential to the economic development of Black communities and cities like Pittsburgh.

"Small businesses employ half of the workforce today and African-American men with a degree are 50 percent more likely to start their own business," said Jackson. "Entrepreneurs hold the seeds to overcoming economic stagnation."

Jackson does not limit his passion for entrepreneurship to talk. He has been a busy man since the finale of the first season of the "Apprentice." Along with various television appearances and lectures nationwide, he and some business partners have started Legacy Holdings LLC, a diversified portfolio company that deals in everything from real estate development and investment to television production and fashion.

Legacy's first project will be a mixed-use development called "Rosewood City" in Prince George's County, Md. The \$3.8 billion project will include commercial and residential properties, restaurants, a performing arts center, retail stores, recreational centers and a medical facility.

While Jackson has achieved great success through this real estate venture, he said flat out that it has nothing to do with his experience on "The Apprentice" or anything he learned from working with Trump.

"I want to be very clear to people that Donald Trump did not host a real estate seminar or do a lecture. Donald Trump filmed his scenes and left," he said.

He also wanted to let it be known that his entrepreneurial endeavors are not limited to just real estate development. As a businessman he keeps his options open and is always willing to look at something that could turn out to be a worthwhile investment.

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"I'm about making money," he said. "I enjoy my life and I want to do lots of different things, but I also believe that financial independence and building financial wealth is something that as a community we haven't always focused on and this is part of a way that I feel like I'm going to make a more lasting difference."

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