

# Groups hope Obama phenomenon spurs recruits

*Black organizations look to ride 'a wave of optimism' that the president has started.*

BY TIMOTHY PUKE  
 TRIBUNE-REVIEW

When Susan Jackson watched the presidential inauguration, she sat in a dimly lit Downtown lounge with a group of people from the National Black MBA Association's Pittsburgh Chapter.

She joined the group last fall, three years after moving to Southwestern Pennsylvania from Louisiana. She had been a member of a chapter in Louisiana and thought rejoining in Pittsburgh would be a good way for her to network in a new city and, more importantly, volunteer in the group's scholarship program for children, she said.

The local MBA association and Jackson represent what leaders of the region's minority organizations hope will be a larger trend.

The 80-member chapter is pushing to grow by half this year. Group leaders and members like Jackson believe the Obama phenomenon could help them do it.

"Just with the timing, the economy falling apart ... what else can you do but take (President Barack Obama's) hopeful approach?" said Jackson, 37, of Cranberry. "I want to be the person who can say 'I did everything I could.'"

Leaders of two other groups, the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh and the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania, also agreed that Obama's recent call to service could encourage citizens and corporations to engage with groups like theirs.

They have good reason to hope, said Laurence Glasco, who is studying Pittsburgh's African-American history as a professor at the University of



David Hopkins, 39, of Robinson watches Barack Obama's inauguration ceremony with members of the National Black MBA Association's Pittsburgh Chapter at Olive or Twist, Downtown. The 80-member chapter's goal is to grow by half this year. JUSTIN MERRIMAN/TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Pittsburgh.

"The impact is going to be profound," he said after returning from the inauguration. "When people are optimistic, they're more likely to participate in all sorts of things. And this is going to be a big morale booster."

It hasn't been easy for these types of groups, some of which have struggled for relevance after the Civil Rights Era. Just this past fiscal year, the local Urban League had a \$200,000 combined drop in donations and membership income, according to its annual report released last summer.

The group did, however, see

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gains in its higher membership categories, some with fees higher than \$1,000, said Chief Executive Officer Esther L. Bush.

The league has successfully

focused on finding more members willing to donate the most, but has been hampered in recruiting other members because of a lack of staff, she added.

One way it is trying to in-

crease its relevancy is through its auxiliary group, the Urban League Young Professionals of Pittsburgh.

Young adults are a big target for growth, and they understand the present and future social needs that the league can focus on, Bush said.

Derrick Tillman volunteered for Obama and sees an alignment between the group and the Obama message: Both are focused on rebuilding communities, and that should energize other Obama supporters to join Urban League Young Professionals.

The group has about 40 members, and Tillman, 28, of

Wilkesburg said he thinks they can double that, including getting some with expired memberships to renew.

The 7-year-old group is still going through some growing pains and trying to get organized, Tillman and other members said.

Tillman is the membership co-chair even though he has been a member for less than two years, he said.

"You had so many people wanting to be involved, e-mailing about becoming a member, and there was no one to really engage them. There was no one to collect dues. It was a huge void for the organization," he said about why he took the position. "I think if you just follow up, once we do get them engaged, once they join a committee, they have ownership and they're more involved."

The African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania has had major growth since Doris Carson Williams became president 10 years ago. It had 28 members then and now has 504.

Last year's poor business climate dampened the group's growth: It lost four members for every five it gained, she said. But previous growth could allow the chamber to take advantage of the widespread unity the Obama campaign fostered.

About 20 percent of chamber members are businesses owned by whites, Hispanics and Indians, Williams said.

"The charge that he gave for his address was for people to get involved. If you look at it from that standpoint, I think everybody will benefit, not just black organizations," she added. "I think what we will catch is a wave of optimism. Optimism means more entrepreneurs out there."

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