

Strengthening Business Acumen in Western Pennsylvania

By Sonya M. Toler

In the western part of Pennsylvania, no one has the pulse on the business climate for African-American entrepreneurs like Doris Carson Williams.

She has been at the helm of the African-American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania as president and CEO since 1999, after being named director in 1998.

As a result of the visionary leadership of Williams and the chamber's officers, the chamber has grown to become the second largest minority chamber in the country.

One of the keys to the chamber's success is its ability to evaluate the business landscape and shape programs and services that strengthen the business acumen of its members.

Currently, Williams says the chamber is "redefining its future. We are making things more applicable for our members and young entrepreneurs."

At the chamber, change is an avenue to growth. Growth has been the measuring stick that has guided the chamber's success.

The chamber is much more than something to join in order to get discounts on various kinds of insurance. Williams and the officers maintain a focus on opening doors of opportunities for members "so they can compete in the global market place."

Some of those door-opening experiences result from the impact-ful mentor protégé program and the accompanying two-

year business institute. There are monthly networking breakfasts, offering access to the leaders in the region's business environment.

Their formula obviously works because the chamber members are reaping the benefits of membership by growing their bottom line.


Having a background in business, Williams has excelled in explaining the case to corporations and earning their support.

"The only way this region is going to grow," she says, "is if small business owners increase by helping them grow to the next level so that they can, in turn, help others. So when small business owners win, we all win."

Prior to coming on board with the chamber, Williams was director of business enterprises for Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh. Prior to that, she was a vice president at Dollar Bank.

Her expertise is sought after as reflected by the boards on which she serves, including Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield, University of Pittsburgh Institute of Politics and The Riverlife Task Force. She also co-chaired the 2009 G-20 Summit, which was held in Pittsburgh.

Williams admits that running the chamber is a 24/7 job, but she finds time to enjoy her family, her church and needlepoint.

For more information about the African-American Chamber of Western Pennsylvania, visit aaccwp.com. 

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