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## Black Chamber seeks entrepreneurial equality

*Tries to build minority-business opportunity through advocacy, mentoring activities*

By Samantha Maziarz Christmann

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Nestled among a mix of tidy homes, independent businesses and boarded up houses on East Delavan Avenue sits the Black Chamber of Commerce of Western New York.

Formed 15 years ago by a band of concerned citizens on the East Side of Buffalo, it has devoted extensive time, effort, and resources to the advocacy that it says has begun leveling the economic playing field for black entrepreneurs.

Often finding itself at odds with mainstream businesses and government has bred in members a level of suspiciousness.

“We have the minority conversation, and then we have the majority conversation. They’re very different,” said Lumon Ross, Chamber president and co-founder.

Conducting business as a black person comes with a unique set of challenges, and educating the white community about how that experience differs has been difficult.

“Black businesses unfortunately don’t come in with a lot of strength, and don’t have the multiple layers of support systems that white businesses do,” Ross said. “Once one is known as competitive, the nature of business is to kill it.”

The group no longer reveals its membership by name or number. Because of the pressure it has put on local political figures, just mentioning an affiliation with the Chamber is enough to be branded a “troublemaker,” Ross said.

As part of its fight for parity in business, education, and employment, the Chamber has been a visible member of Career Path, a group of 53 community organizations working to ensure that minority workers are part of the \$1 billion Buffalo schools reconstruction project.

“Without the advocacy of the Black Chamber and Career Path, we would not have had the opportunity to be involved,” said Richard A. Cummings, chief operating officer of ARC & Communications, a local security systems company and Chamber member.

When the schools project began, minority participation percentage goals were in the low teens. Now, the aim is to hire 25 percent of its contracts out to minority-owned companies, and an additional 5 percent to women’s business enterprise.



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But its advocacy has not stopped the Chamber from collaborating in the community.

“They have been on board from Day One, and have been a great asset for the past 12 years,” said Franklin Sciortino, district director of the U. S. Small Business Administration Buffalo district office.

The Chamber is a founding cosponsor of the SBA’s annual “Straight Talk” small business forum, and has been a valuable partner, Sciortino said. He credits the Chamber’s expertise and feedback with the success of weekly business workshops held after the event.

“A few years back, it was six degrees below zero, and there were 106 people there,” he said. “Members have been there giving one-on-one counseling every year.”

The Chamber helps local black businesses obtain funding and bonding, and is finding ways to remain vital in a changing world.

### **The youth movement**

Staying plugged in to the next generation of entrepreneurs is a big part of that strategy.

The Chamber hopes to eventually focus 50 percent of its resources on community youth outreach.

“Children are No. 1. They are our future business owners, they are our future consumers, they are our future, period,” said Ross. “People talk about adding more and more businesses and members — and yes, we want to do that — but that’s not [the most important] thing.”

The Chamber offers black youths education, mentoring, networking and hands-on experience — the lack of which has left the East Side struggling to survive, let alone able to compete in a global economy.

By year’s end, the Chamber hopes to have mentoring programs in place among established merchants, financial institutions and non-profit agencies to provide youths with an insider’s view of the business world — particularly that of finance and investing.

Brenda McDuffie, president of the Buffalo Urban League and chair of Career Path, said finding successful black entrepreneurs to serve as role models for black young people can be one of the greatest challenges, but also a crucial component for a community’s success. Only 4 percent of businesses are black-owned in Erie County, almost half the national average of 7.6 percent.

“It’s important for [children] to see that connection. Every successful business owner can point to a person they first saw in their community who was doing it, who they could relate to,” McDuffie said. “The Chamber is serving a vital role.”

The Chamber provides mentoring for business owners, as well. By maintaining a central core of black businesses, the Chamber provides entrepreneurs with a network of people with similar goals who can provide support, resources, advice and inspiration.

“The idea of a black chamber of commerce is a very important and significant one,” said Henry Taylor, director of the University at Buffalo’s Center for Urban Studies. “It brings entrepreneurs in the community together to talk about their interests as a whole, and the policies driving the problems they face. They can then identify their mutual influence and engage it to change those policies.”

### **Fosters mutual support**

In addition, Chamber members’ commitment to patronize each other’s businesses strengthens them individually and as a whole.

According to the U. S. Census Bureau, there are 1 million black-owned businesses in the United States, accounting for over \$100 billion in annual sales. By encouraging local black people to patronize businesses in their own community, the local Chamber hopes to harness part of the \$800 billion in expendable income black people spend each year in the U. S.

Part of that figure translates to tourist dollars, and accessing that money is another of the Chamber's goals. To lure visitors, though, Ross said there is a need for an improved parks system, safer streets, beautified facades, as well as entertainment and retail destinations on the East Side.

"Currently, the pitch is that tourists can stay on the west side of Main Street, because it has everything. We don't agree with that," said Ross. "Some of the tourists coming into this community are black, and they don't necessarily want to stay on the West Side of Buffalo when they know somewhere out there is a black community."

Despite its achievements, Taylor believes the Chamber's greatest accomplishment is its very existence.

It is an obstacle, he said, convincing the owners of barely surviving businesses to join forces and add more work to their already stressed schedules. And it is an obstacle that can make or break a neighborhood's economic viability.

"It sounds small, but it's a huge challenge," he said. "In order to change the environment [on the East Side] we need to create jobs and take advantage of economic development opportunities, and we need a highly organized business community if that's ever going to happen."

*The Black Chamber of Commerce meets the fourth Saturday of each month in the Frank E. Merriweather Jr. Library, 1324 Jefferson Ave. Dues are \$100 for members, \$50 for supporters. Call 995-0622 for more information.*

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