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The key to success

Attorney: Getting to know people changes business, culture, lives

Wednesday, February 15, 2006

For attorney James Keys Jr., networking is as important to business success as it is to effectively changing lives and culture.

Keys runs his own estate planning and business legal services practice out of his home in Wetherington. Included in Keys' 30-year career is service as an assistant to the Ohio attorney general and as a magistrate in the domestic relations division of Hamilton County Common Pleas Court.

He ran twice for common pleas judge during the late 1990s. He was defeated both times.

"But I developed a lot of new friends and relationships on the east side and the west side (of Cincinnati)," he said. "It gave me exposure I hadn't had in that area, and that's what it's all about."

The more members of different races and religions are able to learn about each other, the more they will realize they all struggle with the same issues, Keys said.

"It's what Dr. Martin Luther King was trying to say, it's not so much about the color of one's skin as it is about the content of their character."

In addition to an extensive resume of community service including sitting on the board of directors for the Fitton Center, Wetherington Golf and Country Club and president of the Cincinnati Recreation Commission, the 56-year-old lawyer has also made gains for black professionals in the region.

He co-founded Harmon, Davis and Keys in 1991. Before he left seven years later, it grew to become the largest black law firm in Cincinnati.

"Having been a part of co-founding (the firm) in the Greater Cincinnati area, which is not generally known to be that friendly or receptive to African-American professionals, was a tremendous accomplishment."

Keys is a member of the Black Lawyers Association of Cincinnati/Cincinnati Bar Association Roundtable. In 1998, he co-founded the Greater Cincinnati Minority Counsel Program, which works with major corporations like Procter & Gamble and Kroger to encourage diversity requirements in seeking legal help.

"If you never open the door to these opportunities, you never get to know each other," Keys said.

Joe Hinson, president and CEO of the West Chester Chamber Alliance, agreed the chamber membership is not an accurate reflection of the population.

"But I think that has an opportunity to grow," Hinson said. "This area is very transient and also becoming very diverse."

U.S. Census data from 2000 shows that in West Chester Twp., about 4.7 percent of the population identifies themselves as African-American compared to 2.8 percent in Liberty Twp. and 5.3 percent in all of Butler County.

Bob Vincent is a counselor for Service Corp Of Retired Executives (SCORE), in which retired executives give business advice to small business owners.

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Vincent said he estimates 25 percent of the small business owners SCORE counsels are black.

"I think it probably goes back to demographics," Vincent said.

Hinson said the low representation of minorities compared to the current population is a reflection of the chamber not doing a good enough job reaching out.

"It's something I've said all along. We need to continue to embrace diversity as it continues to build. If we want to be a model community, that's what a model community does in the 21st century," Hinson said.

Throughout his long career, Keys has found the professional culture is still not equitable for blacks. But all people face challenges, because people carry around certain "predetermined biases," he said.

By working together, groups can realize it's not just one group that has these impediments.

"We've always taught our (two) boys, don't let the fact that you're African-American become an excuse for you not being able to accomplish something. If you run into something you consider to be unfair, try to find a way to work around it."

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