

So Much More Than a Place at the Table

GIANT Services Their Diverse Customers

By Mikell Worley



Diversity is not the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do,” states Deborah D. Vereen, former Senior Director of Organizational Effectiveness and Diversity for Giant Food Stores, LLC. “When we shift our view of diversity and inclusion from a deficit to an asset, a light bulb goes on.”

Deborah was instrumental in bringing systemic changes to the Giant Food Stores that serve our Central Pennsylvania communities. “The changes needed to be systemic because the goal was to ingrain diversity, not have it as a silo. It’s one thing to attract people but another to retain them. Thus, you want to insure a welcoming and inclusive environment.”

From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, Deborah and her husband owned and operated a Acme Supermarket in central New Jersey. It

focused on customer service that went beyond filling the kitchen pantry. In addition to groceries, their store housed a sub-station of the U.S. Post Office, service meat—which is fresh cut, not prepackaged meats—and a pharmacy. Their store was also adjacent to a packaged liquor store. “The local population represented both a high-end section and a low-income area and our hope was to initiate a resurgence of the community,” says Deborah.

Because the couple divorced, they closed their store in 1986. As a result, several of their staff applied for positions at the newly built Giant Food Store located in Yardley, Pennsylvania, a nearby town bordering New Jersey. Deborah began to get calls for references and was asked if she would be interested in working at Giant. It was clear that she would bring a wealth of experience, insight, and expertise

to the table. However, at that point Deborah was only interested in a job, not a career. Raising her son was her primary focus.

She accepted a job but committed to staying only for two years. However, at the end of that time she decided to stay and get serious about her career, so she returned to management. “At one point in my career I was the only female and the only [store manager that was a] person of color,” she remembers. When Deborah retired in 2008 the industry had many more women and minorities in management. It was a vastly different workforce than when she had first began 22 years earlier.

Deborah’s challenge as a Giant store manager was to convince others of the value of incorporating diversity. “I had to define diversity by relating it to the bottom line and by connecting the dots to show the benefits for



the organization.” The census was one of the first tools Deborah used to initiate change.

“I believe in asking pertinent questions, so I asked, ‘What percentage of the population are people of color in the four states we serve? (Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia)’ I was told it was 10 percent, but I was convinced that it was higher. Through demographic analysis I determined it was an average of 25 percent—[an error gap of] 15 percent. The potential for increasing our customer base was significant. In order to be responsive, products, staffing, marketing, and community involvement all needed to embrace diversity and satisfy the needs of our customers,” reasoned Deborah.

That was only the first step. There was fear and resistance to the changes, so she worked diligently to help the staff work through their reservations. “Our view of diversity, whether through business or personal experience, is based on when, from whom, and how we received our

information,” states Deborah, currently president and CEO of Deborah Vereen, LLC, Diversity and Inclusion Strategies. “Many may have had negative experiences, formed bias presumptions, or were misinformed. Our perspective changes when we have the appropriate data and view diversity as an opportunity.”

Deborah applied creativity and innovation to assist the team in working through changes. She developed and delivered workshops including “The Cover of the Book” and “Adjusting Your Business Lens.” She recorded excerpts from a collection of her favorite quotes that she calls “Pearls of Wisdom” on her voice-

mail, changing them frequently to send the messages that were appropriate at the time.

In 2003, five years before Deborah was scheduled to leave her position, she created an employee resource group that continues to ingrain diversity into all aspects of the organization. The creation of ALANA (African American, Latino, Asian, Native American) provided access and opportunity for diverse perspectives. The group provides input to Giant executives on staffing, marketing, product selection, and community involvement and has proved to be an invaluable resource.

Deborah also created the Female Leadership Advisory Council in 2006. Originally

**A few of Deborah D. Vereen’s
“Pearls of Wisdom” relating to diversity:**

Change is Constant—Be Receptive
and Recognize the Opportunities!

Diversity is the Art of Independently
Working Together—Working Together
Precedes Winning Together

Success is a Journey—
Not a Destination

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comprised of female store managers, (“Remember when there was only one?” asks Deborah with a smile.) it has since grown to include women in all levels of leadership.

Steve Harfield, the current Director of Organizational Effectiveness and Diversity for Giant Food Stores, states, “The foundation that Deborah Vereen has built around diversity has enabled Giant to become one of the leading companies in Central Pennsylvania addressing this issue. Recognizing the value of diversity, Giant Food, LLC, continues the work of the ALANA resource group and the Female Leadership Advisory Council, who are driven to provide a diverse perspective to business partners on how we do business today. Diversity has become part of our culture as a critical component of our business goals, objectives, and policies and procedures.”

In 2002, GIANT/MARTIN’S opened their first Super Food Store in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania as a one-stop shop designed to provide a feeling of community and hospitality. A myriad of produce and products are available to satisfy every palate. The community hub features a café, cooking school, access to an on-site nutritionist, pharmacy, a childcare center, and a dry cleaner. It features several specialty brands including Cook’s Corner, Hallmark, Nature’s Promise, and Staples.

Deborah notes that, “Camp Hill Giant is a destination store because it reflects the diversity of the area in catering to their expectations of service, product variety, staffing, health and wellness, and community engagement. It’s a great example of perception and reality coming together to achieve an inclusive environment for associates and customers.”

Two additional GIANT Super Food Stores have since followed. A store in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, opened in 2008 and the location in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, began serving customers in 2009.

Thanks to the groundwork of Deborah D. Vereen and the continued vigilance and perspective of Steve Harfield, our community is experiencing an enhanced celebration of diversity and inclusion. Not only do more people have a place at the table, but they like what they are having for dinner! ❖

Mikell Worley is an artist and writer. She is the founder and president of Mikell’s Treasures. (www.mikellstreasures.com) She is the managing editor and feature interviewer for Women-CONNECT. Mikell has illustrated several books. She is an advocate for women and children.