



# DESTINATION DIVERSITY.

## *Enjoy the ride!*

By Amma Johnson

**H**ave you ever been on a seemingly endless journey only to realize at some point, “Whew! We’ve come a long way!” I feel a lot like that as it relates to the diversity efforts here at the chamber. Have we come a long way? Absolutely. Have we arrived at our destination? Not yet. It is all too easy to focus on what still needs to be done, but it’s certainly okay to pause and celebrate the progress that has been made. Celebrating success is part of the journey, and it gives you a second wind for the rest of the ride.

The Harrisburg Regional Chamber & CREDC (Capital Region Economic Development Corporation) is in the sixth year of its diversity initiative, and I can truly say that we’ve come very far. I am proud of where we are

today. I have to say that working at the Harrisburg Regional Chamber & CREDC for the past five years has been a tremendous opportunity. The staff and leadership are outstanding, and the things we do in our community and in our region are phenomenal.

Our president and CEO, David Black, believes in the value and importance of our diversity program. He views embracing diversity as another opportunity for the chamber to further grow and impact the community. Dave explains, “When we started the diversity initiative back in 2004, we knew we wanted to raise the understanding of diversity in general in our regional business community. It has and continues to be a learning experience, but we now clearly understand the changing demographics of our nation and our region;

we clearly understand the business case for business diversity; we have had national and local experts in business diversity come to our conferences, forums and smaller events; [and] we have partnered with large companies, small companies, Dauphin County, and minority-based not-for-profits on our journey. I think there is more understanding and acceptance of diversity, and a greater appreciation today that a diverse, inclusive region is a healthier region as we continue to learn more on our journey.”

You can visit our website to read more about our organization’s mission, but if I had to describe our intent in one word, it would be “catalyst.” A chamber of commerce approaches diversity very differently than the average for-profit organization. Most chambers

of commerce have a very small and mighty team, all of whom spend 80 percent of their time engaging with the community. Our success is both measured and perceived by our outreach efforts. When it comes to diversity, chambers of commerce have to be “generalists,” not “specialists.” Although we cannot solve diversity issues for all members, we make it our goal to be a hub that can provide the necessary resources and offer education for the community.

Here are a few highlights of what we’re doing in our diversity efforts:

#### ANNUAL EVENTS

For the first four years of our diversity initiative, we held an annual Business Diversity Works Conference. The conference drew about 400 attendees. Again, our goal is to be a catalyst in the region, and this particular event definitely helped to create an awareness of diversity in our area. After the fourth conference, we decided that we needed to shift our focus to small business. We launched the Supplier Diversity Symposium where we brought together purchasing/procurement contacts and small businesses for networking and education. Our goal is to help create contracting opportunities for small businesses.

We’ve recently partnered with Dauphin County to help promote their annual diversity conference as well as to jointly host an annual diversity networking reception. The reception is an amazing night where members of local diverse chambers and organizations can come together for an evening of networking. The mission and vision of the event is to bridge gaps between cultures and celebrate the diversity in our business community.

#### BUSINESS DIVERSITY ADVISORY COUNCIL

Our Business Diversity Advisory Council (BDAC) is a group of outstanding community leaders that includes attorneys, small business owners, diversity directors, and corporate executives, all of whom are interested in helping direct the chamber’s diversity efforts. Currently, the BDAC co-chairs are

Deborah Vereen, of Deborah Vereen, LLC, and Frank Miles, VP and General Counsel with Hershey Entertainment & Resorts. Their leadership in recent years has helped us to become more effective.

#### CREDC EDUCATION & LENDING

Think of our organization like a coin, we are a single unit, but we have two sides. The Harrisburg Regional Chamber side deals with recruiting and serving our members. The CREDC side is involved in a number of projects that help to expand, create, and attract business into the region. Linda Goldstein, the vice president of CREDC, puts together an annual series of educational workshops that reach out to the community. The workshops are free and cover topics such as social media, bonding and bidding, succession planning, and more. During the past five years, the CREDC team has made a concerted effort to work with minority- and women-owned businesses, helping to finance several projects.

#### LUNCH AND LEARN SERIES

In 2008, we launched our Business Diversity Lunch and Learn series as an effort to provide education on various issues of diversity. We’ve covered topics including supplier diversity, employing the disabled, hiring and recruiting, and avoiding discrimination. This continues to be a consistent way that we can educate our members.

#### MURATA BUSINESS CENTER

The Harrisburg Regional Chamber & CREDC also owns and operates a business incubator in Carlisle. The Murata Business Center offers guidance, mentorship, and business support services for start-up and emerging businesses. In keeping with our desire to promote diversity, the Murata Business Center has assisted several immigrant business owners in connecting with the region. A few of the businesses in the Murata Business Center are owned by minorities and/or women and use the resources of Murata for business expansion. The executive director, Karen Gunnison, also serves as a member of our Business Diversity Advisory Council, and is a wealth

of information for businesses owners in our region. For more information on the Murata Business Center, visit [www.muratabusiness-center.com](http://www.muratabusiness-center.com).

#### SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT & MENTORSHIP

A very large part of what we do is plain and simple, we help small businesses. We’ve chosen to go beyond the walls of membership in our community, reaching out to minority- and women-owned businesses to offer guidance and access into greater opportunities. In partnering with the Kutztown Small Business Development Center (SBDC), we not only help point entrepreneurs in the right direction, but we have also launched a small business mentorship program. Several members of our Business Diversity Advisory Council volunteered their time and expertise to help put together this program. Nine businesses participated in our first program, all of which were minority- and/or women-owned. Our goal was to provide these businesses with additional support and connect them with available resources and new contacts. This six-month program provided an opportunity for businesses to get direct support and brainstorm with peers while learning how to expand their existing business. Most recently, our partnership with the SBDC has produced hosting a seminar series in South Allison Hill.

Even with all that we are currently doing to incorporate diversity into our organization, we are always on the lookout for additional ways to knit diversity into all aspects of what we do. Although we view this process as a continual journey, it never hurts to kick back, marvel at how far we’ve come, and settle in to enjoy the ride! ❖

Amma Johnson serves as director for Business Diversity with the Harrisburg Regional Chamber and CREDC. Her primary focus is to assist people of color and women to start and grow their business. She and her husband are the owners of Johnson Marketing Group, a graphic design and branding company. She can be contacted at 717-213-5030 or [ajohnson@hbgrc.org](mailto:ajohnson@hbgrc.org).