

2009

CORETTA SCOTT KING

Women For Diversity Award Winner



Yvonne Cook

by Mikell Worley

Yvonne Cook radiates energy and passion for the work she does at Highmark, Inc. In March 2003 she joined the company's corporate office in Pittsburgh as vice president for Community & Health Initiatives and president of the Highmark Foundation. In these roles Ms. Cook is responsible for the management and direction of the day-to-day activities for the Highmark Foundation, a private corporate foundation with assets totaling \$100 million, and the Highmark Corporate Giving budget of \$8 million. Ms. Cook holds a bachelor's degree in public administration from the University of Pittsburgh

and a master's degree in public management from the H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy & Management at Carnegie Mellon University.

Yvonne credits her parents for her commitment to helping others. "Even though my family did not have much when I was a child, my parents were givers. They always found a way to help others. And I have always found it easy to follow one of my favorite scripture verses, 'Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act.' (Proverbs 3:27)" Yvonne takes the spirit of giving to another level. In 2007 Highmark awarded \$6.3 million to non-profit organizations as part of its mission to provide valuable community services that help people live longer, healthier lives.

"Although we are living in a time of progress, there is still much imbalance and inequity in the world today. One of my goals is to use my knowledge and position at Highmark to make connections in the community that can help create equality where possible." There is no doubt that she has made a difference. Her generosity extends well beyond financial giving. Yvonne volunteers her time and shares her expertise with many boards and committees. She is treasurer and cofounder of the August Wilson Center for African American Culture and serves on the board of directors for the Manchester Bidwell Corporation, the Multicultural Arts Initiative, and Grantmakers of Western Pennsylvania. Ms. Cook is also a member of Grantmakers in Health.

Yvonne is passionate about promoting equal opportunities for women and minorities. To that end she served on the Minority, Women, and Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Committee for the city of Pittsburgh for nine years to ensure that those entities would have equity in receiving city contracts.

Eager to share valuable information about healthy lifestyles, Yvonne is an educator who is also sensitive to deliver information so that it will be well received. "Through Highmark, I am able to share my understanding of community needs with those who are looking to make a change in their lives. Sometimes people can hear information, realize it would be beneficial, and still not apply it. But if the information comes at a time when they are ready to receive it, they may make changes that could help improve their health or even save their lives," observes Yvonne.

Ms. Cook is particularly enthusiastic about promoting opportunities provided by Highmark that are available online and at community fitness centers. There is no charge for people insured through Highmark and a minimal charge for others. Highmark's website provides a wealth of information at www.highmarkbcbs.com.

The year before Yvonne began her current position at Highmark, a publication titled *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care* was released by the Institute of Medicine in 2002. The report concluded that racial and ethnic minorities receive lower quality health care than whites, even when patients are of comparable age, income, and have similar insurance.

Under Ms. Cook's leadership, Highmark took a proactive approach toward rectifying the situation. The company considered numerous factors blocking equal access, including cultural and language barriers, health literacy, and the cultural competence of health-care providers, especially those involved in outreach efforts. Yvonne looked at how to better educate employees internally. As a result Highmark now provides cultural competency training for its 18,500 employees, including medical directors, clinical staff, and customer service representatives. Yvonne also serves as a member of Highmark's Internal Diversity Council, which guides Highmark's diversity efforts toward integration with key business objectives and workforce changes.

Many of us in the Harrisburg area are familiar with Yvonne because of The Fun, Fit, and Fabulous!® Conference. Each year Highmark presents a one-day health forum for women of color to educate and motivate them to take a proactive approach to their health. This year will mark the 7th anniversary of The Fun, Fit, and Fabulous!® Conference. Held every August, participation grows each year.

Health experts and community organizations from across Central Pennsylvania and beyond convene at the conference to provide information that will not only impact women's lives, but those of their families as well. As an offshoot of the conference, Highmark also brings together key community stakeholders and challenges them to address the issue of health care disparities.

"The conference offers a variety of free health screenings that enable women to evaluate their health based on fact, not speculation. Keynote speakers of international renown self-disclose and inspire, a variety of workshops are presented throughout the day, and the women move! Hundreds of women dancing and exercising together, laughing en masse as they realize that exercise can be enjoyable."

Promoting equality; delivering health care information with creativity, sensitivity, and grace; working tirelessly and enthusiastically to fund, support, and promote opportunities to improve the quality of life for people is impressive. Yvonne Cook does all that, and more. She takes it to another level by making it *Fun* to be *Fit*. Yvonne Cook, thank you. You are *Fabulous!* ❖