



# The personal experience of Jerry Harmison, Jr., a participant in the FACING RACISM workshop hosted by the Grand Rapids (MI) Area Chamber of Commerce:

"What stood out for me the most about the workshop was an activity where all 20 participants lined up against a wall in an empty room and held hands. We were told to take a step forward if we would answer 'yes' to each of 25 questions. The activity was to be done in silence. I was holding George's hand. He is African-American. Everyone stepped forward for the first three questions. The participants of color took no more steps, while the other participants proceeded across the room. I felt helpless when I had to let go of George's hand, as I moved forward and he did not. The questions asked, 'Can you do the following without considering your skin color: move to a new neighborhood and know you will be welcome; go to any restaurant in town and feel comfortable; participate in a job interview and know the decision will be based on your resumé, etc. Letting go of George's hand and moving on without him was a moment I will never forget. Some people go months or more without considering that the color of their skin may have an impact on their daily life, while others must give thought to it daily."



By J. Mac Holladay, CCE, and Ellen Anderson, AICP

*E pluribus unum* — "out of many, one." Since the infancy of the United States, this motto has adorned our Great Seal, our currency and our official documents. The phrase originally conveyed the concept of a single nation emerging from many states and many countries.

In recent years, the motto has come to suggest that out of many peoples, races, religions and ancestries, a single people and nation has emerged — a "melting pot." Our wide variety of backgrounds and experiences has given us brains, talent and strength; the United States of today is undisputedly among the supreme powers of the world.

How did we become so prosperous? It all stems from our diverse population base. Diversity has become a vital and important issue, especially for chambers. Webster defines diversity as "differing from one another — distinct or unlike elements or qualities." Diversity comes in many forms and descriptions. It is about age, race, ethnicity, lifestyle choice, religious beliefs, family makeup, and many more things. There is no question that our world becomes more diverse every day — in almost every way.

### **DIVERSITY. CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:**

Racial and Ethnic Diversity: Between 2000 and 2009, the U.S. grew by 25.5 million new residents. Eighty-three percent of this growth (or 23.1 million) was accounted for by non-white residents. Demographers at The Brookings Institution predict the U.S. will be "majority minority" by 2042 — Washington, D.C., Hawaii, New Mexico, California, and Texas are already there. This is due to several factors, including an older median age among white women, immigration, and higher fertility rates among minority populations. The Census Bureau reported that last year nonwhite minorities accounted for 48.6 percent of children born in America, a figure that is predicted to surpass 50 percent next year.

Quality of Life Choices: Many downtown areas nation-wide have undergone a renaissance as more adults and families seek out the urban alternative to suburbia. A 2005 University of Pennsylvania study of 44 downtown areas found that during the 1990s, many downtowns were transformed following 20 years of population decline. Downtown homeownership rates have more than doubled since 1970 and downtown populations continue to grow in size and diversity.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, smaller communities that offer a distinctive character, walkable downtowns, and housing options have experienced similar trends — such as Rome, Ga.; Rogers, Ark.; or Carmel, Ind.

**Generational Diversity:** June Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) figures indicated that the unemployment rate among 18–24 year olds is 18.1, well above those for 25–39 year olds (9.5), 40–64 year olds (7.3) and seniors ages 65 and

older (5.6). In fact, one in four 18–19 year olds participating in the labor force is unemployed. When hiring improves, there will be an entire generation of workers who need to "catch up" before they have even entered the game. At the same time, the number of workers between the ages of 65 and 74 is predicted to grow 83.4 percent by 2016, continuing the trend of a rising number of seniors rejoining the labor force. Such statistics point to increasing generational diversity in the workplace.

**Religious Diversity:** In 1990, 86 percent of the American adult population identified themselves as Christian compared to 76 percent in 2008. In addition to greater religious diversity, more adults are willing to convert to other faiths than in past generations. A 2007 survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 28 percent of adults have left the faith in which they were raised for another religion (or no formal religion), while 44 percent of adults have either changed faiths or affiliations within their faith.<sup>3</sup>

**Sexual Orientation:** The 2010 Decennial Census will (for the first time) incorporate measures for same-sex couples, including those who identify themselves as married. Gays and lesbians can now legally marry in five states (Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont), and four additional states plus the District of Columbia recognize legal same-sex marriages performed elsewhere. Data also show that younger generations are more accepting of gay marriage and same-sex unions. A recent Pew Research Center survey of "Millenials" (the generation following "Generation X" who are currently between the ages of 18 and 29), states that they are the only generation in which a majority of its constituents favor the legalization of gay marriage.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Source: Eugenie Birch. "Who Lives Downtown?" University of Pennsylvania and the Brookings Institution. 2005.

Some are frightened or put off by the changes that an increasingly diverse population brings, while others embrace them. In the world of community and economic development, diversity is a multi-faceted issue that must be considered in the context of a community's overall competitiveness. It is about workforce; it is about economic mix; and it is about place. Frankly, more is better on all these fronts. All of us have learned the hard lesson of depending too much on one business or industry sector. Recent economic times have proven without a doubt that sometimes even strength in two or three business sectors of a community or region may not be enough to prevent significant job losses.

"Quality of place" is defined by personal preferences. Many young people have no use for gated communities or country clubs. They want to walk or ride their bike to work and mix with different people of all shades and stripes. The more choices a community or region



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Source: The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey." 2007.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Sources: The Census Bureau; The Pew Research Center. "Millenials: A Portrait of Generation Next." February 2010.

has for people of all kinds, the better position they will be in to compete in the future.

Most chamber leaders are convinced that a quality workforce is the key to a prosperous future. Every community needs all of its young people well educated and committed to life-long learning. More and more firms and business sectors are globally connected, and the workforce needs to reflect the vast cultural choices of both clients and customers. As our communities reflect the growing diversity of the workforce, we cannot afford to leave any group behind.

Over the past several years Market Street Services has had the great pleasure of working with a few of the many chambers actively engaged in diversity issues of all kinds. Here are some of their stories:

### SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

The **Sioux Falls (SD) Area Chamber of Commerce** and the Sioux Falls Development Foundation serve one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country, one of only two in the Midwest to make the top 50 in the nation in terms of population growth.

While the Sioux Falls region has had a difficult time competing with Omaha, Des Moines, and the Twin Cities for young professionals, the region has been successful in attracting immigrants to supplement regional workforce needs. Minority residents account for 10 percent of the total population, and have fueled 22 percent of Greater Sioux Falls' total growth since 2000. Many community stakeholders have credited the influx in diversity to the region's low cost of living, its entry-level jobs with employers who promote a cultural sensitivity and openness, and the involvement of Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota, which sponsors refugees.

The Multi-Cultural Center of Sioux Falls estimates that the region's immigrant populations represent more than 95 countries, including many in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and Eastern Europe. Over 57 languages are spoken in Sioux Falls schools. In fact, the Center for Immigration Studies, a non-partisan research organization devoted to analyzing the economic and social impacts of immigration on the United States, has identified Sioux Falls' Minnehaha County as a "New Ellis Island" based on its number and proportion of foreign-born immigrants. To help address the needs of new residents and changing community dynamics, the Chamber and City of Sioux Falls supported the establishment of a task force led by community and business leaders to explore potential solutions. The Multi-Cultural Center was founded in 1996 as a result of this process.

The Center raises awareness about multiculturalism by sponsoring events in Sioux Falls public schools, hosting discussion groups, providing diversity training for employers and employees, providing interpreters and translators, and offering assimilation assistance in areas like language, driving, housing, food and nutrition, and computing. The Center offers more than 25 programs, most of which have been identified externally as best practices.

The Sioux Falls Diversity Council was born as a response to a racial confrontation among youth in the community in 2003. It began as a race council task force with eight working groups and is now a 12-member permanent Diversity Council. One Sioux Falls resident Market Street spoke with during our 2009 strategic work said, "I believe the business community here believes and

understands that multiculturalism is good for Sioux Falls in terms of workforce competitiveness and conveying the message that we are an 'open' community that welcomes newcomers." **Evan Nolte**, longtime Chamber **president and CEO** stated, "It is our collective feeling that the Multi-Cultural Center and the Diversity Council must continue to provide leadership in improving and enhancing their programs working with other non-profits and governmental organizations in the area and state if we are to have success in the future as a community, given the continued growth of diversity in the population."

### MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Like many major Southern cities, Montgomery was an important location for a number of pivotal Civil Rights events of the mid-20th century, starting with Rosa Parks' legendary refusal to give up her seat on a bus. While the region's role in social justice has been a point of pride for many, historic racial tensions and distrust were in many cases perpetrated by and against community members for decades.

In 2005, the **Montgomery (AL)** Area Chamber of Commerce initiated a process to develop a five-year strategy called "Imagine a Greater Montgomery." During the course of strategy development, stakeholders identified a lack of diversity in Montgomery's civic and business leadership that did not represent the makeup of the community's demographics. "Civic engagement is badly colored by race," one community member commented. It was also noted that women were underrepresented in decision making.

Four major goals emerged from this planning, one of which emphasized the community's need to further embrace diversity and enhance leadership capacity. "The very future of Montgomery hinges upon our ability to capitalize upon the strength of our diversity," the plan explains. The Chamber's plan for accomplishing this objective has been a model example for other chambers.

The Chamber hosts several events in support of diversity:

- Diversity Summit: Hosted by the Chamber's minority business development staff, this day-long event offers executives, human resources professionals, and community leaders an opportunity to have a conversation about workplace diversity, inclusion, and engagement. Now in its third year, the summit has been immensely successful and has been replicated by other chambers eager to leverage their own diverse community strengths.
- Emerge Montgomery: Initiated in 2008, "Emerge Montgomery" is the young professionals' component of the Chamber's "Leadership Montgomery" program. One of its key priorities is to dissolve racial barriers while cultivating future leaders through a network of events, outreach and professional development opportunities. The Chamber's goal through Emerge is to assist the next generation of community leaders in addressing and eliminating historic hurdles to positive diversity so that its young talent will stay, engage and invest in Montgomery.
- Women in Business Forum: An important characteristic of any program that aims to involve diverse groups is being flexible to the different needs and expectations of different types of people. While many businessmen in Montgomery were able to network and do business after-hours on the golf course or over cocktails, many of their female colleagues

were racing from their jobs to their roles as the primary caregiver in their homes. These tight schedules for the community's female business leaders demanded events and opportunities that could fit more easily into a full day of office, home, church and community obligations. The Chamber's "Women in Business Forum" hosts sessions and seminars over coffee and lunch and facilitates networking that can be squeezed into even the busiest of schedules. The forum provides mentorship and networking opportunities for women in large and small firms, helping Montgomery's female business leaders through professional development and entrepreneurship assistance.

### **GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN**

With public school students speaking more than 40 languages and representing over 53 countries, Grand Rapids and western Michigan have seen rapid demographic changes in recent decades. The Hispanic population grew by 175 percent in the past 10 years; African-Americans own over 1,200 businesses in western Michigan; and Asian-American residents have one of the highest rates of educational attainment in the region. These factors indicate that Grand Rapids' populations are thriving and need to be sustained for future regional prosperity.

The **Grand Rapids (MI) Area Chamber of Commerce** has been a leader in extensive diversity and cultural workplace training and

# Picture it: [Your name here], CCE

Join the more than 500 chamber executives who have added this prestigious designation to their professional credentials



"When I started the CCE process, I found that my day-today chamber experience accounted for the majority of the content needed to earn the designation. It was as if I had been working towards my CCE all along! Chamber professionals who want to improve their skill sets and leadership abilities should go for their CCE."

Dave Adkisson, CCE
President & CEO, Kentucky Chamber of Commerce
2009-10 ACCE Board Chair

Start taking the next step in your career today! The application process begins in the fall of each year. Review the eligibility criteria, and when you're ready, complete our "Intent to Apply" application found on www.acce.org/cce.

Applications for the 2011 Class are due December 3, 2010.
For more information, contact Toni Crouch at 703.998.3536 or visit www.acce.org/cce



programs through its Diversity Division. In 1997, it created the Institute for Healing Racism (IHR), a 10-week reflective learning program that aims to help local business leaders understand and eradicate racism, grow creativity and tolerance, and compete globally for talent and business. According to **Sonya Hughes, vice president of diversity initiatives and programs**, IHR has educated more than 1,800 people about what racism is and how it exists today. "Although there is still plenty of work to be done, employers have reported the Institute has had significant impact on strategic plans, recruiting and retention practices, purchasing practices, and in general engagement around becoming a more welcoming, inclusive professional community," she says.

In addition to IHR, the Chamber offers an intense, two-day FACING RACISM workshop (see a participant's narrative on page 7) which examines the root of racial fears and facilitates breaking down racial barriers. It also sponsors the Multiracial Association of Professionals (MAP), a network of professionals of all races to help welcome people and celebrate racial diversity within the community. MAP services assist employers to welcome, retain and connect professionals of color and their families to the Greater Grand Rapids Area.

The objective of diversity within the community is clearly an important focus for the Grand Rapids Area Chamber. "Now that we have a good understanding of what racism is, our next step is to really understand how to cause institutional change. Also, how does business lead this initiative? It's usually seen as a grassroots effort," says Hughes.

### **AUSTIN, TEXAS**

From 1990 to 2009, the Hispanic population in the Austin metro area increased from 179,000 to 521,000. The city's tagline in recent years has been "Austin — The Human Capital." Over 38 percent of the population has a four-year degree versus 27 percent nationwide. However, when it comes to the Hispanic community, the percentage is only 16 percent.

To counteract this, the **Austin (TX) Chamber of Commerce** launched an aggressive educational initiative consisting of two powerful programs. One focused on increasing the percent of students who graduated ready for college-level work without remediation. The other was called "Financial Aid Saturdays." Across four counties, the Chamber advertises in Spanish and English to take advantage of the 440 volunteers who help complete the financial aid forms for federal and state aid to college. The Hispanic community has taken great advantage of the program, and those who submit the application before high school graduation are now 450 percent more likely to directly enroll in college. Austin is working hard to make sure its Hispanic community is an equal partner in quality education attainment.

### SPRINGFIELD, MISSOURI

Springfield, Mo., was recently ranked as the second "least racially diverse city" in the United States among metros with populations exceeding 400,000. As **Jim Anderson, CCE**, the president of the **Springfield (MO) Area Chamber**, remarks, "From an economic development standpoint, that puts us second from the bottom."

Anderson continues: "That represents a problem for business. Our community has already suffered economic losses because



Now that we have a good understanding of what racism is, our next step is to really understand how to cause institutional change. And also, how does business lead this initiative? It's usually seen as a grassroots effort.

## Sonya Hughes, Grand Rapids (MI) Area Chamber of Commerce

of our lack of cultural diversity... it is not just a problem for the future. It is a problem now."

Anderson recommended to his board of directors that diversity must be made a strategic priority issue for 2010. As a result, they passed this challenge statement: "Communicate the connection between a culturally-diverse community and economic sustainability through education and engagement of the business and faith-based organizations to create a community culture that is less isolated and more open to all."

With assistance from the chamber in Grand Rapids, the Springfield Area Chamber sponsored a Facing Racism Institute for two days in June 2010. The result for the 20 attendees and the community has been "transformational." "We have each been called to action," said Jennifer Jackson, one of the seminar's participants, when quoted in a *Springfield Business Journal* column. Springfield is just one of many chambers moving actively to affect positive change regarding diversity.

### LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

In 2008, Jay Chesshir, CCE, president of the Little Rock (AR) Regional Chamber, convened a powerful community-wide steering committee to consider Little Rock's most difficult problems challenging its economic future. Issues of racial tolerance and diversity — and their implications for educational progress and community development — were discussed extensively during the public input and identified in the top five challenges in a related

### Set Up Solid Employee Benefits



## Attract and retain talented employees with the ACCE Group and Voluntary Insurance Program!

Pick and choose from a variety of ACCE endorsed products:

- Personal Accident Insurance
- ✓ Short Term Disability
- ✓ Long Term Disability
- ✓ Long Term Care
- ✓ Dental Insurance
- ✓ VSP Visioncare
- ✓ Group Term Life

©2010 AGIA



FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT www.acceinsurance.com TODAY!



Without having all sectors of the community involved in charting a common strategy, sustainable growth is impossible to achieve. Unity in mission, after understanding diverse issues and needs, is powerful in creating meaningful change.

### - Jay Chesshir, Little Rock (AR) Regional Chamber

community-wide online survey. While many stakeholders emphasized that Little Rock — and some of its leadership — remain racially divided, others noted that the region's history and existing diversity were strengths that should be leveraged rather than accepted as obstacles.

The result of this analysis was the creation of a "consensus community strategy" which led to a proactive work plan called "Better Together." The goals were clear and connected: create a world class education system, embrace diversity and build unity, and establish safe communities. Actions regarding diversity included creating a Unity Council, using young professionals regionally, coordinating public information exchange, and facilitating active cultural understanding programs, including "Mix It Up" and "Diversity Days."

"Without having all sectors of the community involved in charting a common strategy, sustainable growth is impossible to achieve," Chesshir cautions. "Unity in mission, after understanding diverse issues and needs, is powerful in creating meaningful change. We're now on the path to such a strategy and mission."

### **DECATUR, ALABAMA**

Like many American communities, Alabama's Decatur-Morgan County has seen its minority population grow rapidly in recent years. The Hispanic population grew 74.2 percent in 2007, accounting for 68 percent of the county's overall population growth, while the number of black residents within the county also grew during the same period, contributing 28 percent of the county's population growth. At the same time, the white population, which made up 80 percent of the total population, declined slightly.

These dynamics presented significant challenges to Decatur-Morgan County, where illegal immigration is a growing problem impacting school and hospital budgets. As one community resident commented, "Unfortunately for those from other countries who are here legally, it makes it difficult for them to be accepted because there is such disregard for those who are here illegally."

"Diversity is valued but not made a priority," observed another community member. "I see patterns of voluntary segregation (from all races) that no one is really working to address." Still another remarked, "People do not embrace change here."

John Seymour, the Decatur-Morgan County (AL) Chamber president and CEO, knew these changes were undermining the community's positive progress in workforce and economic development. A strong community-wide steering committee worked for six months to hammer out a new vision for the county. The result was a proactive community action plan called "One Vision

— One Voice — One Morgan County." There were six key goal areas, three of which were "dedicated to diversity and new people, keeping our best and brightest, and the sustenance of leadership, dynamic and visionary."

The change in Decatur is significant and building every day. The Chamber has sponsored the community's annual minority recognition dinner for the past eight years. However, this year, because of the new "One Vision" initiative, the event was expanded to include a day-long Diversity Summit that closed with what Seymour described as "an enhanced recognition and awards dinner to recognize accomplishments in the community and to celebrate our community's diversity."

The Chamber is also working hard to promote gender diversity in the local workforce. It created a "Women in Business Celebration" that recognizes groundbreaking achievements from female leaders. The Chamber's SweETY (Summer Welding and Electrical Technology) Camp exposes high school girls to career paths that have been historically dominated by men. In conjunction with Calhoun Community College, the camp offered a week-long welding class. "This year, we had 21 girls graduate," notes Seymour.

### **OUT OF MANY, ONE**

The list of active chambers goes on and on. There are great stories across the country — from the Chamber's embrace of immigrant-run small businesses in Gwinnett County, Georgia, to the successful diversity "study circles" in Hopkinsville-Christian County, Kentucky — that continue to frame this issue.

All of these chambers understand that nurturing diversity as a key program area (and value) is as important to our success as infrastructure development and marketing. *E pluribus unum* — we reap the assets brought to our regions by the people who live and work there, and then leverage their combined strengths to build one prosperous community for all. Remember, people (and companies) can locate anywhere they choose — and they will. Competitive communities are ready to welcome them and accept their differences. Embracing diversity and inclusion in your community is vital to creating a competitive future.

J. Mac Holladay, CCE, is the founder and CEO of Market Street Services, Inc., an independent community and economic development consulting firm that has served 125 communities in 28 states over the past 13 years. An ACCE life member, Holladay can be reached at (404) 880-7244 or mholladay@ marketstreetservices.com. Ellen Anderson, AICP, is director of research at Market Street Services and can be reached at (404) 588-2439 or eanderson@marketstreetservices.com.