

MINORITY ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

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SECTION

Sam Brooks, OAME reach maturity

Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs Plaza fills with 24 firms, employing 70

By Lee Perlman

As Sam Brooks sits at his desk at the Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs Cascade Plaza, he's surrounded by living testaments to his own accomplishments.

OAME inherited the building from Portland Community College's Cascade Campus in 1993. Since then it has expanded to 40,000 square feet and by next week, should be fully occupied by 24 firms employing 70 people.

New arrivals include the J.A.H. Co., manufacturer of baby clothes, and I.A.M. Technology, manufacturer of insecticides and repellents. Diane's Coffee Shop is leaving, soon to be replaced by a new full-service restaurant, Brooks says.

All the occupants are businesses owned by ethnic minorities or women, or are agencies that can serve them such as the Northeast Workforce Center. The same is true of the contractors who built and service the center.

J.E.C., Inc., a tenant, did the center's plumbing work, Anctil Sheet Metal the air conditioning, Ed Wilson the electrical work, Hernandez Construction the cement work, Island Landscaping the plantings and the Telephone Clinic, the security system.

Ron Limbrick does cleaning for the building, and security is provided by another tenant, Northwest Sentry, security provider for Act III Theaters.

"If we can't be an example of what we're talking about, we shouldn't be talking," Brooks says. "What people say they can't get out of small minority businesses, we get. You can walk around this building and see the quality of their work."

OAME provides other services as well: a reference library that includes city plans and regulations governing land development; a business center with a staff and equipment, including internet access; and a directory of minority-owned businesses, subdivided by category.

The association has an annual luncheon with a guest speaker and theme devoted to a particular ethnic group. For instance, this year they honored Native Americans. Next year they will do the same for European Americans.

At such gatherings, Brooks says, "You don't have all the African-Americans sitting together, or all the Hispanics by themselves, you have everyone sitting with everyone."



Sam Brooks leads Oregonians united for business success at OAME, the Association of Minority Entrepreneurs.

(Photo by M. Washington)

When he first proposed setting up such a multi-ethnic business organization in 1985, Brooks says, "People thought it was ludicrous." In some places, such as Florida, he says, it would in fact be "just impossible" because "each group has its own strong organization.

In Oregon, there's a spirit of coopera-

tion, and small numbers of people in many ethnic groups."

OAME started with eight member businesses. It received invaluable assistance from Pacific Development, which provided it with a 2,500 square foot facility for \$1 a year, as well as U.S. West Corporation, PGE, Nike, Bank of America and

Pacific Gas and Electric.

"It wasn't 'We want to help poor people,'" Brooks says, "but 'We want to grow a community that will be our customers.'"

OAME now has 450 member firms whose operators hail from 65 different countries of origin.

In 1993, PCC Cascade withdrew support from its incubator campus, and the facility was "dying on the vine," in the words of Portland Development Commission president Carl Talton.

Talton met with Brooks and Ron Herndon of the Black United Front to discuss how to preserve the facility. "We decided Sam's organization was the best one to take it over," Talton says.

Earlier, Brooks wasn't as successful with his Alberta Corridor Project proposal. He proposed to market the street as a multi-ethnic shopping district, and to build a new commercial anchor building at Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

The project fell through in part because Brooks couldn't achieve consensus among the street's business people and property owners. The anchor site is now an Adidas store. Other organizations such as Sabin Community Development Corporation and Franciscan Enterprises are leading the effort to revitalize Alberta.

"It's not as we envisioned it, but it got done," Brooks says. "In the end, the corridor will do just fine. The ownership for what's happening is in the community, which is the important thing."

Born in Tennessee, Brooks first came to Portland while serving in the Navy, when his ship underwent an overhaul at Swan Island.

He worked at Techtronix, transferred to the State Employment Service, then started S. Brooks & Associates employment service, which he still operates.

He was lured into volunteer activity through his daughters' schools by former neighborhood coordinator Edna Robertson, and went on to chair the school district's Area Three Advisory Committee.

Brooks has also served on the Union Avenue Boosters, the Portland Chamber of Commerce board (the first African-American to serve), and both the state and national Small Business Advisory Committees.

Brooks says he is looking toward retirement ("Not next year, but there's more behind me than in front of me.") He is gradually decreasing his role in OAME, having passed the directorship on to Jorge Guerra.

"My daughters used to call OAME their step sisters because I spent so much time here," he says. "I'm happy we can see that phase being done."

An economic power soaring

Hispanics' purchasing power stronger than many countries

Hispanics' purchasing power in the United States soared to \$211 billion in 1996 — greater than any Spanish-speaking nation in the world. What's more, all evidence points to strong growth into the 21st century.

Population growth alone will tend to put inexorable upward pressure on Hispanic income and spending. In fact, the U.S. Hispanic population is growing at a rate more than double that of the non-Hispanic population due to higher-than-average birth rates, as well as immigration.

Between 1990 and 1996, the number of Hispanics swelled 25 percent to 28.3 million. By 2000, that figure is expected to top 32 million. Moreover, the population's youth implies that its greatest earning and spending years lie ahead. The number of Hispanic households working their way into the middle class also spells growth in the market's purchasing power.

Hispanics' purchasing behavior is unique

Hispanics have more disposable income than African-Americans and tend to spend it differently than the population at large. For instance, Hispanics spend a higher percent-

age of their income at the grocery store, especially on meat, fish, and poultry.

Boom in Hispanic Media

Hispanics' improved economic prospects and advertisers' recognition of their growing diversity (a first-generation, Spanish-speaking Hispanic has different needs and consumer preferences than a third-generation, English-speaking Hispanic) has also sparked a boom in Hispanic media.

Not only are Spanish-language television and radio stations flourishing, programmers are also moving to fill the void in offerings that reflect the tastes and lifestyles of American-born, English-speaking Hispanics.

In television, that means more shows geared to young, urban audiences such as those tuning in to Fox and WB; in radio, it means bilingual formats, Tejano music, and the FM band; in print, it means both more Spanish-language and English-language titles, as well as titles that are bilingual, like the new, stylish Latina.

In fact, a growing body of opinion finds that a bilingual approach to the Hispanic market is best. It leaves no one out, respects Hispanic heritage, and allows consumers to choose the language with which they are most comfortable.



Leading the charge for the Green Team

Cori Steward of Portland (right), director of Community/Restaurant Services for Denny's Restaurants owned and operated by Portland native and NBA all-star A.C. Green, meets with a prospective employee at Portland Community College job fair.