

The Portland Observer

Bringing Diversity to the Table Advocates focus on new leadership

By Sarah Blount/The Portland Observer
March 21, 2007

Considering the good deeds of non-profits in Portland's communities of color, surprisingly few minorities represent the organizations making critical decisions for their own neighborhoods. That's because white members still make up the majority of the boards that govern these organizations.

The volunteer group Hands on Portland is working to connect minority business leaders with non-profit and government institutions through a program called Civic Leaders.

"There is a growing percentage of people of color in Portland, but if you look at boards they remain homogenous," said Andy Nelson, executive director of Hands on Portland.

A pilot program for Civic Leaders traces its roots three years prior when now-city commissioner Sam Adams paired with diversity advocate Vicki Nakashima to recognize the obvious diversity shortcomings.

"A common thing I hear from leaders is they are interested but don't know how to get connected," Nelson said. "What I hear from the boards is they are interested in increasing diversity, but don't know how."

"The goal is to create a network of leaders who can share stories of similar struggles of being the only person of color on a board," said Hands On program manager Brenden Butler. "It has been educating to see how many barriers there are."

Ella Booth is a good example of a leader of color who found the right fit.

As associate dean of diversity at Oregon Health Sciences University's school of medicine, Booth joined the Portland Community College Foundation Board in July through the help of Civil Leaders.

She serves on the board's finance subcommittee, which reviews and recommends scholarships to students throughout the district.

After Nelson learned a little about Booth, he suggested the PCC Foundation as a natural fit. Originally from Baltimore, Booth attended a community college while holding down a full-time job and raising two children as a single mother.

"We talked to Ella about where she wanted to be," Nelson said, "and she was able to

get back to the type of institution that got her going."

Booth said as a product of a community college, she was interested in being involved in helping future PCC students.

"Because many students are disadvantaged economically, I find it a humbling experience to read their stories and recommend a scholarship."

PCC serves a broadly diverse population. Yet Booth is only one of two African American board members, joined by two Hispanic members and 14 white members, which raises the question, can the board more accurately reflect PCC students?

"No, the boards don't represent the diverse number of students, especially in community colleges, but they're working on it," Booth said. "Any time you can diversify any board, it's to everyone's advantage."

Campfire USA, an organization that has diversity as one of its core values, has worked closely with Civic Leaders since the program's inception. They haven't placed a board member yet, but CEO Keith Thomajan said he hopes to within the next few months.

"The process is akin to dating," he said.

With a 20-person board including African American, Asian, Hispanic and Latino members, plus sexual minorities across a broad age range, in which direction can Campfire take its pursuit?

"This has been an exceptional opportunity to have frank discussion of what diversity is," Thomajan said. "It gave us a chance to assess our board's current make-up, and consider where we want to be in terms of diversity one, two and three years from now."