

New diversity initiatives touted at the June 19 CEIR conference

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EXECUTIVE MATERIAL—Highmark VP Evan Frazier outlines an executive sponsorship program for African Americans. (Photo by J.L Martello)

In welcoming guests to the Fifth Annual Corporate Equity and Inclusion Roundtable forum at Duquesne University, founder Tim Stevens displayed a photo of his great-grandfather that he found while helping his sister move.

“He was born a slave, but died free,” said Stevens. “The Emancipation Proclamation was just 154, yet for the first 20 years of my life there were African Americans who were still denied the right to vote. And I thought of that in context with my own son, who is 16. What kind of world will his grandchildren be born into? If the work being done by some of our presenters and partners is any indication, it will be more diverse and inclusive than we can imagine.”

In addition to Stevens, attendees also heard welcoming remarks from Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto, whose recent executive order implementing a modified “Rooney Rule” requiring minority candidates be interviewed for all management-level job openings in city government was included in the program.

Other highlights included a panel discussion with representatives of several trade unions—which for many years were less than welcoming to Black members—who are actively seeking to recruit minorities and women to fill jobs that will be starting within two years and could last two decades.

“With the Shell cracker plant—which won’t start major construction for 18 months—and possibly two other petrochemical plants poised to make this region the hub for the plastics industry, we’re looking at 20 years worth of work, and we don’t have the people,” said Builders Guild of Western Pennsylvania Executive Director Jeff Nobers. “And that’s just construction. Operating engineers, plumbers, electricians; we’ll need them all.”

Panelist Erin Brooks, a journeyman wireman with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local No. 5, said as an African American who spent years in state prison, the union really is a second chance.

“I have my own home, I have my son with me and I owe it to the great job and training I have,” he said.

Another idea designed to increase the number of Black executives in Pittsburgh companies to the level it was in the 1990s—and beyond—was presented by Highmark Senior Vice President for Community Affairs Evan Frazier. He envisioned a pipeline that, via education, executive coaching and professional sponsorship, would target the unique challenges of Black executives and build their numbers.

The idea was so well received that the Carnegie Mellon Tepper School of Business will begin such a program to help inaugurate the opening of the new Tepper School building on the campus next year.

But for a truly holistic approach to building diversity to the point where it isn’t even second nature, but first nature—keynote speaker and University of Pittsburgh Senior Vice Chancellor for engagement Kathy Humphrey said Pitt is it.

“We are trying to develop a culture of inclusion—we don’t proclaim to have it right, but we are going beyond a vision plan, beyond a plan—we are implementing this to where diversity and inclusion is ingrained in the very fiber of our institution,” she said.

“We are talking in hiring, in management in our student body and in our vendors. We’re not doing this because it’s trendy or nice, we’re doing this because celebrating our differences is good business and gives us new ideas that will advance our research, our instruction and our services.”