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Omaha community leaders involved in diversity initiative say it's already a 'game-changer'

By Henry J. Cordes / World-Herald staff writer
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Erik Servellon, center, leads a LeadDIVERSITY discussion in South Omaha last week. Servellon is among the second an generations of Latino immigrants who are making their mark in Omaha. The Central High grad is deputy director of the Initiative and is running for school board.

CHRIS MACHIAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

The tour bus rolled north down 16th Street and came face to face with the DoubleTree, one of Omaha's oldest downtown hotels.

But in North Omaha, the hotel built a half-century ago is known by many as something else: a barrier. To make way for it, the city closed 16th Street between Dodge Street and Capitol Avenue, severing the easiest, most direct route linking downtown with Omaha's black community.

"Boxing it in," said Jade R. Rogers, a black history professor serving as the guide during this look into Omaha's racial past and present.

Rogers' audience on the bus was made up of 25 Omahans taking part in a new program intended to train community leaders on the value of diversity and inclusion and show the way to incorporate such policies into organizational cultures and workplaces.

If people from diverse backgrounds in Omaha are going to work, live and prosper together, they first need to understand each other. That's one reason the participants in the "LeadDIVERSITY" program last week climbed aboard a bus that took them through North and South Omaha, the respective hearts of the city's black and Latino communities.

The ultimate goal of LeadDIVERSITY is to not only help workplaces become more inclusive, but also train a network of advocates who can help lead a broader community drive for equity.

“This helps us create a greater army of individuals who are going to push this message forward in a truly authentic way,” said Cammy Watkins, deputy director of Inclusive Communities, the Omaha human relations organization behind the initiative.



Twenty-five community leaders tour North and South Omaha to learn more about the city's black and Hispanic communities. The group gathers once a month.

CHRIS MACHIAN/THE WORLD-HERALD

Since its launch this summer, the program is already making an impact. Its first cohort of participants frequently describe their experience as eye-opening and life-changing.

“It’s been a game-changer,” said Jennifer Deitloff, senior associate general counsel at the Scoular Co. “You feel like you have to be a part of it and part of the change.”

And Deitloff has been. She broke away early from Wednesday’s tour so she could be on hand as Scoular rolled out a new company diversity and inclusion initiative, one that was influenced by her work with LeadDIVERSITY.

Indeed, diversity and inclusion are much talked about these days in the business world, so much so that they're now often referred to simply as "D & I." Business leaders are increasingly concluding that if Omaha and Nebraska are going to compete and thrive amid a worldwide shortage of skilled workers, they need to embrace everyone, no matter their race, gender, sexual orientation or economic status.

But while the concept is new to many businesses, Inclusive Communities has made inclusiveness its mission for decades. Formerly known as the Omaha chapter of the National Conference for Christians and Jews, the organization has its roots in 1938, when Omaha businessman Otto Swanson learned of a secret boycott of Jewish businesses and rallied the community to stop it.

LeadDIVERSITY is Inclusive Communities' latest initiative to spark conversation in Omaha about bridging differences.

The program's first participants are themselves a diverse lot.

Selected from companies, nonprofits and government organizations across Omaha, more than half are people of color, nearly two-thirds are women, and three identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or non-gender conforming. Since starting the yearlong program last summer, participants have spent a full day together once a month learning and talking about diversity.


In December, they heard Creighton University law professor Palma Strand detail the history of redlining in the 20th century that kept Omaha's black population segregated, north of Cuming Street and east of 30th. Not only did the federal policy isolate black people, it often kept them from getting loans to buy their own homes, as banks often refused to lend to people living in economically depressed communities.

That lesson particularly struck LeadDIVERSITY participant Kara O'Connor, who works as a financial adviser for Edward Jones. She knows homeownership is one of the primary tools for families to build generational wealth.

"That still has an impact to this day," she said.



Workforce challenges prompt business leaders' call for a more inclusive Nebraska

By Henry J. Cordes / World-Herald staff writer  12 min to read

In January, the group toured the Tri-Faith Initiative, where a Christian church, Jewish synagogue and Muslim mosque have co-located on a campus near 132nd and Pacific Streets. The visit, which included hearing from a Holocaust survivor, gave hope to Shawntal Mallory, a vice president of the Omaha Home for Boys.

“If they can come together on something people are so passionate about — faith — we can do it in our organizations as well,” she said.

For their February session, participants met up Wednesday morning at the headquarters of the Omaha Public Power District, one of the sponsors of LeadDIVERSITY, and heard about the power company’s diversity initiatives.

Tim Burke, OPPD’s CEO, spoke passionately about why the topic is important to OPPD and Omaha — and to him personally. Burke has a son who is gay who left Nebraska to live in a place he believed would be more inclusive.

Then the group hopped on the bus, with stops to learn firsthand not only about Omaha’s black and Latino communities, but its Native American and refugee communities as well.



Erik Servellon explains LeadDIVERSITY to a group at El Museo Latino, one of several stops on the initiative's bus tour through North and South Omaha.

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Albert Varas of the Latino Center of the Midlands told the group how sometimes bright kids in South Omaha miss school not because they lack motivation but because they have jobs to help support their families. The center works with those families to organize schedules to make sure the kids are in class.

Through school success, the second and third generations of Latino immigrants are making their mark in Omaha. Erik Servellon graduated from Central High School, earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Nebraska at Omaha and now is running for the school board.

Servellon, who recently was named deputy director of the Tri-Faith Initiative, told the group during a lunch stop at El Museo Latino that if nonprofits in Omaha are looking to diversify their boards, many Latino young professionals want to get involved and serve their communities.

“Look us up,” he said.

Later at Love's Jazz & Art Center near 24th and Lake, North Omaha community leader Willie Barney talked of the progress seen over the last decade. Omaha has gone from having among the nation's highest black unemployment rates to one of the lowest. And gun violence has been falling dramatically.

Then Carmen Tapio, CEO of telemarketing firm North End Teleservices, told the story of her four-year-old business, one that challenges the idea that businesses can't succeed in North Omaha. On performance metrics like rate of return for clients or on customer retention, the industry veteran would put her firm's performance up against any in the industry.

Tapio said many of the firm's 200 employees had not previously experienced success in life and lacked hope. But they are supported by an in-house social worker, and mentored and cross-trained in various tasks to give them the opportunity to move up in the organization and to grow. Not only does that provide opportunity, it appears to create employee buy-in, too.

The firm's chief operating officer started off as an administrative assistant. The company helped another employee hired out of drug rehab earn a two-year degree in computer science. Now that employee is an operations specialist for the firm.

"That's what success looks like to us," Tapio said.

At the end of the day, the LeadDIVERSITY group met with government officials, including Omaha City Council members Ben Gray and Pete Festersen. The councilmen applauded the effort, saying the ultimate goal needs to be making diversity and inclusion part of the city's DNA.

"I'm hopeful diversity and inclusion is not (just) the flavor of the month," Gray said.

Participants in the program seem intent on making sure that's not the case.

"It's obvious there's much to do," said Abigail Moland, a labor and employment lawyer at Omaha's McGrath North law firm. "But the conversation has shifted."

Some members are already incorporating what they've learned into their organizations. And organically, members of the group are also starting to have conversations about how their organizations can work together to make a difference.

Deitloff said Scoular's leadership team was having conversations about diversity and what the company should be doing. She was coming back from her LeadDIVERSITY meetings inspired, advancing those internal discussions.

That helped lead to the launch last week of a companywide council that will develop Scoular's policies on diversity and inclusion. The idea, Deitloff said, will be to produce meaningful policies and change as opposed to "something on our website."

"For me, this is a lifetime thing," she said. "It's definitely sparked in me a bias toward action."