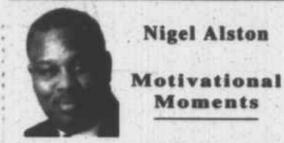


FORUM

Kidscommerce develops entrepreneurs



Nigel Alston
Motivational Moments

"Talent is the gift plus the passion - a desire to succeed so intense that no force on earth can stop it."

-Neil Simon

A few were experienced. Most were newcomers to the world of business ownership. They all had great ideas.

They were under the watchful eye of Devora Ascott-Transou, a business owner and executive director of Kidscommerce, a new program for middle and high school students that develops young entrepreneurs by teaching them the rudiments of owning a business.

Each 'business' had prepared a plan that would make the chief financial officer at a Fortune 500 company smile. Each plan included an executive summary, market analysis, strategy and sales forecast.

The participants all had one goal in sight - to convincingly sell their ideas to a panel of judges.

One after another they presented their ideas. Some were more animated than others, moving around as they described their business operation.

Others stood confidently behind the podium while their high-tech-computer-generated presentations flashed across a screen.

There were InGen Beekeeping Supplies Co.; LATCO Enterprises, a vending machine placement and service company; Water Craft For What It's Worth - which dubbed itself "the only Blue Book for boats."

There were Katie's Violin Academy, The Candleman, Printing Ideas By Justin and Players Plus, a video game store.

And we can't forget Impact Productions, Lynx Computer Services and DsS Printing and Publishing, fine purveyors of "bilingual coloring books for the young and young at heart."

It was quite impressive listening to these young business owners.

One young woman appeared extra nervous. It was probably her first time trying to sell a business idea.

"Take your time," I said. Others, like David Michael Charles Small, owner of MC Beads Unlimited, appeared very confident, as if they were seasoned veterans who have been in business for years.

"I have been told that I am wise beyond my years," he said.

A few are already established and successful, like Jerry Guess, who owns Button Zone Inc., a promotional and novelty button manufacturing company.

Most needed money to start up and/or to expand their business.

Pam Jordan, the parent of one of the young entrepreneurs - James Coleman, CEO,

The Backpack Snack/The Snack That Speaks - said the program was a great idea. "That kind of creativity bottled up in one group, I was impressed in the first 10 minutes," she said. "Kids need to try to get in it."

The Backpack Snack is a combination of food for the body and mind, says the rising 10th-grader at Carver High School. James offers a variety of trail mixes with positive messages on each bag.

"They are nutritious and convenient to store," he explained in a recent interview.

The idea came about as he thought about things he'd like to buy and that other students would like as well.

He is always thinking about improving his product - he wants a thicker, more durable bag. He offers a dried fruit mix that includes apples, pineapples, apricots, raisins, granola and papaya. There also is the original trail mix, hard candy and soft candy mixes and cheddar mix.

He started with about \$100 of his own money and initially sold to "kids and some grown-ups."

And based on his sales during the event, more kids are buying into the idea of wholesome snacks.

His best seller, he said, was the dried fruit until recently when the soft candy mix became popular with 4- to 7-year-olds. He thinks they sold extremely well because they were colorful. The mix consists of two big marshmallows,

sour gummy worms, gummy bears, regular gummy worms and sour gummy apples.

He has written about 50 different messages and tries to add about five a week. He hopes his positive and encouraging statements help influence students to change their thought process, like "living in the past leaves no future"; "you should floss your teeth even at school"; and "community service helps with scholarships."

"It is different," he says. "No one else is doing it."

And most important, James says, is that he's his "own boss."

"I'm not working for anybody. I'm my own boss," he told me. "I make a little bit of change and meet new people."

He has a goal to sell 1,000 bags of trail mix during the months of July and August.

Jordan said she was glad her son participated in the program.

She said the group was creative, the program has good leadership and, most important, it keeps her son involved and active.

That's a recipe for success in her eyes, she said.

"Every parent wants their child to succeed. Owning your own business is good. He is accomplishing something and staying out of trouble."

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Tough talk not enough, Mr. Mfume



Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Guest Columnist

Dear Mr. Mfume,

In your keynote address to the NAACP's 90th annual conference, you blasted the gun industry, the TV networks and police agencies.

Your tough talk made me wonder whether the nation's oldest civil rights group would again become the big player in the battle against racism and injustice that it has been for most of its storied history.

I wondered about this because the NAACP has spent the better part of the 1990s in a monumental retreat from visible cutting edge social activism. That retreat can be directly traced to the collapse of legal segregation in the 1960s, the class divisions that implored within black America and the greening of the black middle class.

This is a process that has been slowly evolving since the death of Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders in the 1960s. They were not only victims of an assassin's bullet, illness and old age. They were also victims of the success and failure of the Civil Rights Movement they sparked, inspired and led.

By the close of the 1960s the movement had spent itself. The torrent of demonstrations, sit-ins, marches and civil rights legislation annihilated the legal wall of segregation. With the barriers erased, the black middle class had a field day. They were starting more and better businesses, marching into more corporations and staking out spots in the top universities. They were spreading out into more of the professions; winning more political offices; buying bigger and more expensive homes, cars, clothes and jewelry; taking more luxury vacations; and joining more country clubs than ever before in the history of the country.

The first chance they got, many packed up their bags and started their flight to greener, suburban pastures. None of their success had even the remotest bearing on the lives of the black poor, who had become even poorer and more desperate. Many of them turned to crime, drugs and gangs as a way out.

You and other NAACP officials are trapped in the middle by the twisting political trends and shifting fortunes upward of the black middle class and downward of the black poor. A tilt toward an aggressive, activist agenda carries the deep risk of alienating the corporate donors that you have carefully cultivated the past few years. You depend on

them to gain more jobs, promotions and contracts for black professionals and business people and to secure contributions for the NAACP's fund-raising campaigns, dinners, banquets, scholarship funds and programs. Following is a list of major issues the NAACP has missed over the past couple of years:

- The mass campaign to remove the TV series "The Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer" from the airwaves in 1998, and the decision by the UPN and WB TV networks to segregate black-themed shows into a single time bloc and then eventually replace them with programs that appeal to young, affluent whites. Even your plan to fight the TV networks' blatant ethnic cleansing of blacks and Latinos from the fall 1999 TV line-up came way after the networks had announced their fall programming.

- The Federal Communications Commission report in 1998 that condemned major corporations for refusing to advertise on black-owned radio stations and in black-owned newspapers.

- The billboards, TV and radio ads by the alcohol and tobacco industry that target young blacks with their ads.

- The movie studios, record companies, black filmmakers, producers, actors and writers that continue to pump out vile and shopworn images of African Americans as crooks,

clowns and charity cases.

- The spread of Three Strikes Laws to more states. These laws lock up mostly poor blacks and Latinos for what amounts to life sentences for mostly nonviolent offenses.

- The dreary plight of thousands of black children trapped in a poorly funded and negligent foster care system.

- The catastrophic escalation in the number of black women in prisons and the heart-rending condition of the children left behind.

- The refusal of Congress to amend the disparity in the mandatory sentencing laws on drug use and sale. This disparity in the laws has done much to skyrocket the numbers of blacks in state and federal prisons.

Mr. Mfume, you must back up your fighting words by fiercely attacking the pulsating issues that confront poor and working class blacks, refusing to take money from those corporations that promote unequal opportunity and again promoting visible activist leadership on the cutting edge of social change.

When you and other NAACP officials arrive home after your conference, we'll see if you do that.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black." His e-mail address is ehutchi344@aol.com

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