

More than 60 people learn tips for achieving their financial goals

FROM STAFF REPORTS

Al Jeter walked out of the first RJR/Urban League Empowerment Conference and into the arms of his wife and four children.

As they gathered around to hug and greet him, Jeter said that they were the reason he came to the conference in the first place.

"I am not just doing this for me," he said.

R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. and the Winston-Salem Urban League spearheaded the Empowerment Conference, a series of self-help workshops for underprivileged community residents. The aim of the conference is to help participants achieve their financial goals and to aid them along toward self-sufficiency.

"Collaborative efforts like this have proven to be invaluable to both RJR and the Urban League," said Delores Smith, president of the local Urban League.

The conference was held Monday at RJR's corporate headquarters downtown. More than 60 community residents took part in the conference. They included young adults in their 20s and senior citizens over 60. Some of the participants are unemployed; the others have jobs but not in the fields they want or not making the kind of money they want.

Jeter has been a barber for almost six years. It's a job that he

says he enjoys, but looking down the road he sees himself as a home owner and a business owner.

"Ten years from now, I see myself in a position to be able to offer advice to other people on how to make it," he said.

Tips and good advice were plentiful at the conference. The workshops were conducted on the topics of banking, credit counseling, home ownership and entrepreneurship. Local representatives from banks, credit unions, real estate firms, nonprofit agencies and the city of Winston-Salem conducted the workshops, teaching the dos and don'ts of their particular speciality to a captive audience.

"We're pooling together some of the most talented business people from the community - many of whom own their own businesses - to conduct these workshops," said Richard Williams, chairman of the Winston-Salem Urban League Board of Directors.

Most participants were chosen by a number of nonprofit agencies, including Experiment in Self-Reliance, the Housing Authority of Winston-Salem, the Winston Lake YMCA and the YWCA Empowering Family Center. Others simply registered at community agencies or at the Urban League.

As president of the Piedmont Park Residents' Association, Jeter

was chosen to attend the conference. He said he didn't have to think twice about attending. The ideas and goals of the event fit right in with the things he wants to do.

"I was enlightened in a lot of areas that I really did not know a lot about," he said, hoisting up a black notebook. Jeter said he took lots of notes and picked up several informative pamphlets.

He plans to take what he's learned and share it with his friends and neighbors.

There are no definite plans to hold the conference again in the future, but Williams told the participants on several occasions that their enthusiasm and feedback would be two of the main factors in determining whether another conference will be held.

Jeter says that he's there, if and when another empowerment conference takes place. The conference made his dreams more focused and his determination more sound and steady.

A feeling of "empowerment" wasn't just limited to Jeter at the conference.

As they posed in RJR's lobby for a group photograph, several participants shouted out "home ownership" just before the camera's flash went off, abandoning the traditional word "cheese" for something more practical and suitable for the time and place.



Photos by T. Kevin Walker



Richard Williams and Delores Smith congratulate participants for completing the conference.

Participants of the Empowerment Conference smile as they accept their certificates of completion. The conference included workshops on banking, credit and home ownership

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