

The Watchful Eye of BRAG

The Black Retail Action Group honors excellence in diversity

By: Sifa Marti

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As the U.S. retail industry responds to global competition, new technologies, new demographics and buying patterns, and the worst economic recession in seven decades, the Black Retail Action Group's watchful eye on diversity was never more needed.

Established in 1970 as a non-profit in New York City, BRAG devotes its resources to helping Blacks and other minorities successfully launch and advance careers in retail through internships, scholarships and advocacy.

"This year our theme, 'The Power of Change,' recognizes that the world at large, including the retail and fashion industries, are on the cusp of a significant transformation. Even as we hear on a daily basis about corporate meltdowns, the global recession and massive layoffs, we must remind ourselves that uncertainty breeds creativity," says Gary L. Lampley, president of BRAG. "The fact that the global fashion industry's landscape is not as vibrant as it once was gives us all the opportunity to create a better industry. That means advocating for diversity and inclusion, demanding change in an industry that exists on the very notion of change and to be recklessly brave in our attempts to move the needle on diversity."

As consumers, Blacks in 2008 spent more than non-Blacks on children's clothing and footwear, and about the same proportion of their income as non-Blacks for household textiles, furniture, floor coverings, men's and boys' clothing, according to the Selig Center for Economic Growth at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business. TargetMarketNews.com estimates that Black women in the United States alone spend more than \$20 billion on apparel each year.

As employees, Blacks make up roughly 10.7 percent of retail salespersons, reports the 2008 Current Population Survey from the U.S. Census Bureau of Labor Statistics. But a still-current study by Business Design Consulting, a research and consulting firm, revealed that of 927 merchandising executives surveyed from 77 companies,

approximately 9 percent were of color, (2 percent African-American, 4 percent Asian and 4 percent Latino).

On October 23, BRAG held its 39th Annual Scholarship & Awards Dinner Gala, recognizing outstanding students and honoring companies and individuals who have made significant contributions to change on the diversity landscape. Actress Malinda Williams (Soul Food) hosted the black-tie event. "I'm honored to be here. Each one of us gets a chance tonight to be a supporter of BRAG and it's countless donations to the community and to retail," Williams told TNJ.com.

The evening was a glittering showcase of who's who in retail. Earvin "Magic" Johnson, chairman and CEO of Magic Johnson Enterprises, received special recognition for his philanthropic works.

"I just want to be known as the man who was all about Black America," he said on accepting his award. "I promised myself that on the court no one was going to outplay me and as a business man no one was going to outwork me. I am successful because I know my customer and my business. I want to always add value to a company by over-delivering to my partners and the community. We can bless our community by giving our time not just our money."

Shawn Outler, the first African-American woman to hold the title of vice president and divisional merchandise manager at Lord & Taylor, now group vice president for multicultural merchandising and vendor development at Macy's Inc., received the Excellence Award.

"When I started [in retail] all I wanted to be was a buyer. Who knew I would come this far," she told the audience. "I moved back and forth between New York and Atlanta not knowing what changes to expect. I want to tell all the young people that change can be good for you."

Accepting his award for leadership, Stephen I. Sadove, chairman and CEO of Saks Inc., stressed the importance of leadership. "It is truly the most humbling experience in my career to receive this award. I stand here representing all the talented people at my organization. The power of Saks is so appropriate in this eye of the storm part of the economy we are in. Like BRAG, our mission is to show leadership. Leadership about creating culture, developing talent and new ideas, we will continue to do so."

Other BRAG awardees this year were:

- Best Buy Corp., recipient of the Corporate Award;
- Richard Dent, senior vice president, chief operating officer and co-leader, Victoria's Secret PINK, recipient of the Special Recognition Award for "the power of presence." Through Dent's efforts, PINK launched a highly successful product agreement with Historically Black Colleges and Universities;
- Constance White, eBay's style director and fashion spokesperson whose columns and blog draw attention to people of color in the industry, received the Special Recognition Award for "the power of the pen;"

- Latisha and Colin Daring, founders of Pieces Boutique in Brooklyn, N.Y., received the J.J. Thomas Business Innovators Award for their creativity as entrepreneurs.

BRAG watches out for and honors those who work to be above average, Lampley said. "I was told by my grandmother [that] when you see a crowd of people running one way and you don't know what's going on, run the other way. Following the crowd is average behavior. Do not strive for average behavior, work to be above average," he said.