

BRAG: Poor Retail Record for Black Advancement

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Photo By: Thomas Iannaccone

Gail Monroe-Perry

NEW YORK — Gail Monroe-Perry, president of the Black Retail Action Group, believes it's sad how very few blacks have climbed the corporate ladder in retailing.

"The numbers are disappointing," Monroe-Perry said during an interview. "We have a lot of progress to make.

"I remember back in the Eighties, when I was a buyer at Bloomingdale's in the home area, it seemed like there were about 10 of us, up-and-coming in the company. You are very hard-pressed today to find two or three buyers in an organization.

"What happens is the same old story: You get candidates at the entry level, but we lose them along the way and a lot of people just go on to other things. It's not as easy [for blacks] to get into higher levels for sure. It's difficult to convince people to stick it out."

Instead, "Entrepreneurships, doing their own kind of production or manufacturing work or real estate, have become increasingly attractive."

She cites findings from a study conducted in 2004 by BDC, Business Design Consulting, a research and recruitment company. "The hard numbers reflect how people of color are not positioned to participate in the industry," Monroe-Perry said.

Of 927 merchandising executives from 77 companies surveyed, 76 diversity executives were identified, or 9 percent of the total, including 2 percent African-American, 4 percent Asian and 4 percent Latino.

Of the 462 planning and allocation executives identified, 76 were diversity executives, or 16 percent of the total, including 3 percent African-American, 9 percent Asian and 4 percent Latino.

Of the 343 technical design executives identified, 116, or 34 percent, were diversity executives, including 5 percent African-American, 16 percent Asian and 12 percent Latino.

"This sample population is finally the hard evidence representative of the staggering numbers we have all been well aware of, almost intuitively. Now that we have these numbers, we believe that it is our responsibility at BRAG to effect change. You may ask the question, 'How?' Well, these numbers can only be shifted through the willingness of organizations to recruit...and giving people the opportunity to be promoted into senior positions."

BRAG, which is celebrating its 35th anniversary this year, will stage its Annual Scholarship and Awards Dinner Dance on Friday at Capitale, 130 Bowery, here. In addition to the 24 scholarship recipients, this year's honorees include Jane Elfers, president and chief executive officer, Lord & Taylor; Vanessa D. Gilmore, U.S. District Judge, Southern District of Texas; Monique Greenwood, owner, Akwaaba Bed & Breakfast Inns; Tracy Reese, designer and president of T.R. Designs Inc., and Peter Weedfald, senior vice president, consumer electronics & North America corporate marketing, Samsung Electronics Inc.

Key sponsors for the event are Lord & Taylor, Bloomingdale's, Macy's, Best Buy, Urban Brands/Ashley Stewart, Wal-Mart, Avon and Polo Ralph Lauren.

In April 2004, Monroe-Perry became president of BRAG, a nonprofit organization run on volunteer services. Monroe-Perry is also senior director of recruitment for Polo Ralph Lauren.

After she joined BRAG, she developed a five-year plan for the organization, part of which calls for hiring a paid executive director to work strictly for BRAG. She has also stepped up marketing efforts, and pushed for the opening of a BRAG office, which recently occurred in Harlem on 131st Street between Park and Madison Avenues, with support from Lord & Taylor, Best Buy and Macy's for office equipment and operating funds.

"Once there is an executive director, working here in full force, we can be in the forefront consistently," Monroe-Perry said. "Membership is growing. We are still working on our marketing. We are the best-kept secret to a lot of people."

The organization was founded in 1970 as a result of a need for African-Americans in retail to have a support system so they could develop careers in the industry and connect with others who could help. BRAG provides scholarships to students interested in a retail career and holds leadership conferences, workshops and seminars, some of which tackle topics such as how to progress in a corporation and retail math. There is also a paid internship program for college and university juniors to work with major retailers; community outreach activities, including a toy drive, and a BRAG FIT Club where guest speakers discuss the industry and offer mentorships.

For more people of color to rise in retailing, Monroe-Perry believes, "It's a matter of being given the chance. Of not being turned away....There are talented people out there.

"But there is also the funding aspect. This year, we are honoring Tracy Reese, who has been in business quite a while. But it's taken a while. She is finally at a point where things are truly progressing and the business is happening. But you have to have partners — people who will support you, and people who will open the door."

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