

What's in the way of workplace equality in Bradenton-Sarasota? Forum explores issues

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By James A. Jones Jr.

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John Holz of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance listens as Tarnisha Cliatt, founder and president of the Manasota Black Chamber of Commerce, sums up Thursday night's Elevating Community forum. James A. Jones Jr. jajones1@bradenton.com

Palmetto

The first Elevating Community event a year ago was on the decision by the Manasota Black Chamber of Commerce and the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance to work together to foster the growth of Black-owned businesses.

The second Elevating Community event this past week was about focus.

The two organizations met again Thursday night and hosted three panel discussions to put the lens on tough, difficult issues standing in the way of equality, greater opportunity for all and the recognition that the playing field is often uneven.

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John Holz of the Lakewood Ranch Business Alliance likened the effort to a NASCAR race, where some cars have full tanks of gas and a set of tires, and others don't.

Holz said he hoped that the conversations, held at the Bradenton Area Convention Center, would be invigorating and lead to action.

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Black-owned businesses

Among those taking part in a panel discussion on how to give Black businesses a shot at procurement contracts were Max Oligarto of Bank of America and Terrie Daniel of the University of South Florida.

USF has significantly improved its business diversity by giving Black-owned businesses an opportunity to bid on contracts, and encouraging USF staff with college credit cards to remember Black-owned businesses when making purchases, Daniel said.

“We have as a university realized that diversity and inclusiveness is crucial to our success,” Daniel told a gathering of about 90 people who took part in Elevating CommUnity. “The overall strategy is not to just talk about it, but to be it. All of us in this room are change agents.”

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Daniel went deeper into the subject, urging business to use “ally-ship” — their power, influence and abilities — to create opportunity for others.

“Is that easy? No. It’s about commitment and ally-ship,” she said.

Oligarto said that Bank of America has a robust program to improve diversity within its ranks. Diversity makes an organization stronger and helps the business prosper, he said.

Panel member Jamal Sowell, president of Business Solutions, urged Black businesses to join the Chamber of Commerce and other business groups so that they and their skill set become known in the wider business community.

“People will do business with people they know because they are comfortable with them,” Sowell said.

In a second panel discussion, panelists took issue with state House Bill 7, which some call an “anti-woke bill.”

Karen Davis-Pritchett said that House Bill 7 has been challenged and said that it is important that diversity continue to be a focus.

“Are we a culture where everyone is seen and heard?” she asked. “If I don’t feel seen and valued, then we have not reached an inclusive environment.”

Bishop Manuel L. Sykes, state bishop of Bethel Community Foundation, said real education makes people think.

“We’re just asking you not to perpetuate the wrongs of the past,” Sykes said.

Affordable housing

In the final panel discussion of the night, panelists discussed the need for affordable housing.

Jon Thaxton, a former Sarasota county commissioner who now serves as senior vice president of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, said local governments approve gated communities and luxury condos all the time, but fail to give equal thought to the need for affordable housing.

Ensuring adequate affordable housing means fewer mental health issues while helping stop generational poverty and homelessness, said Chris Johnson, CEO of Suncoast Partnership.

When you ensure that people have a safe place to live, you end up with a different home and family, Johnson said.

Dawn Stanhope, who served as moderator for the housing panel, said the community can't keep doing what it has been doing and expect change.

During the next year, Elevating CommUnity will reach out to local governments and organizations to see what they are doing to bring about change and equal opportunity, said co-host Tarnisha Cliatt, founder, president and CEO of the [Manasota Black Chamber of Commerce](#).

"We are going to hold them accountable," she said.

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Jamal Sowell said that Black business owners should join chambers of commerce and other business networking groups so that others get to know them and become more comfortable with their skill sets. Sowell was a panelist at Thursday night's Elevating CommUnity forum. James A. Jones Jr. jajones1@bradenton.com