

# Black chamber of commerce aids in ‘creating entrepreneurship’

By Judy Masterson [jmasterson@stmedianetwork.com](mailto:jmasterson@stmedianetwork.com) October 14, 2011 8:26PM



Stacy Bullard of Gurnee, owner of Integrity Developers in Waukegan, was in the first graduating class of the Contractor’s Academy sponsored by the Black Chamber of Commerce of Lake County. | Thomas Delany Jr.~Sun-Times Media Chamber’s day

Black Chamber of Commerce Day will be celebrated Oct. 27 at the offices of the Black Chamber of Commerce of Lake County, 1020 W. Glen Flora Ave., Suite 108, Waukegan.

The theme of the gathering is “Empowering Businesses and Building Sustainable Communities.” Guest speaker will be Mary Lockhart White, executive director/CEO of the Community Action Partnership of Lake County.

Networking begins at 11 a.m., program at noon. RSVP by calling (847) 599-9510 or e-mail [lydia.lewis@bccoflakecounty.com](mailto:lydia.lewis@bccoflakecounty.com).

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Stacy Bullard of Gurnee was already running a construction firm when he became a student in the first-ever Contractor’s Academy sponsored by the Black Chamber of Commerce of Lake County.

What he learned and the support he received helped him to build his business and employ more people. The academy offered a refresher on

small business concepts and the chamber helped him to navigate complex certification paperwork needed for minority participation on government construction jobs.

“The chamber helps us find the opportunities,” said Bullard, 40. “They’ve helped a whole lot.”

Founded in 2006, the 292-member chamber works to create a growth-friendly climate for African-American-owned businesses

“We’re focusing on economic development within our community,” said the Rev. Arthur Gass, BCCLC president and CEO. “It’s been difficult in this economy, but we’ve made progress.”

The chamber also sponsors a pre-apprentice construction training program, which has received funding from the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity. Sixty- six men and women have graduated from the academy since 2009. Eleven students are currently undergoing six-months of on-the-job training.

Gass, 60, who was recently named by Gov. Pat Quinn to the African American Employment Plan Advisory Council, acknowledged a challenge to the academy’s primary goal: To help students pass apprenticeship exams and gain entry into good-paying union jobs. Apprenticeships have dried-up along with the construction industry in the down economy.

“Some (academy graduates) have gotten picked up, but if there’s no work, contractors can’t hold on to them,” Gass said.

Gass said he hopes the state “puts teeth” into its labor agreements so that colleges, school districts and other agencies that receive state funding will be required to hire the underserved people it’s paying to help train for construction jobs.

Projects completed over the past two years by Bullard’s company, Waukegan-based Integrity Developers, include a \$500,000 award-winning early library center for Waukegan Public Library; \$750,000 in improvements to Whispering Oaks, a public housing complex in Waukegan; and \$8 million in electrical and water systems work at Naval Station Great Lakes.

On the library project, 70 percent of subcontracted work went to minority-owned firms, Bullard said.

“I hired two or three people from the apprenticeship program,” he said. “I try to use the local labor force. If they live in the community. They’re going to spend in the community.”

Gass estimates that nine black-owned businesses are thriving today with support from the chamber.

“When people can’t find jobs, we have to make jobs,” he said. “That’s how we can help, by creating entrepreneurship.”

BCCLC has received the Outstanding Chamber of the Year Award from both the national and state Black Chamber organizations. It has also worked to deliver humanitarian aid to Haiti and to help fund a job training facility there.