Black Business Hopefuls Told to Work Hard, Persevere and Dream Big
Al Sharpton and black business leaders deliver inspirational speeches at this year’s BBSA gathering

By Miki Johnson

I
nspiration and progress were the centerpieces of the 24th annual conference held Nov. 18 by Columbia’s Black Business Students Association (BBSA), which connects current and prospective business students with industry leaders.

“Our overarching goal was for people to be motivated and inspired,” said Angela Butler, an ’06 business student who co-chaired the conference. Close to 400 registered for this year’s gathering, entitled “Completing the Picture: Find Your Piece of the Puzzle.”

The BBSA is Columbia’s second largest club, with about 70 business school students as members. Butler said that Al Sharpton, the morning’s keynote speaker, fit in with the conference’s aim because he delivers a message of “who we are, where we come from, where we are now and where we should be 50 years from now.”

Sharpton urged his audience of about 500 to appreciate Rosa Parks and her generation of civil rights leaders and to strive to leave an even more impressive legacy. He also railed against those in today’s generation who think an uneven playing field is an excuse not to play. “Even if you’re not responsible for being down, you’re responsible for getting back up,” Sharpton said, acknowledging that discrimination still exists but challenging his audience not to let that stand in their way.

“I didn’t live my life based on what I didn’t have. I lived my life based on what I had to do,” he said, referring to his own experience as a church and community leader to illustrate his point.

John Clendenin, founder, president and CEO of the St. Louis-based Inner Circle Logistics Inc., gave the lunchtime keynote address, sponsored by American Express Like Sharpton, Clendenin addressed the need for determination to overcome obstacles. Quoting Marcus Aurelius as saying that “what we do in life, echoes in eternity,” he urged his listeners to strive for success—and to consider clearly what constitutes success for each of them.

“It’s up to each of us to define the standard of success,” he said, pointing out that money should be only one part of the equation. “You must be the change you want to see.”

The conference also included eight panels with distinguished speakers from “Emerging Markets: The Rise of the Caribbean and Latin America” to “Building Wealth: Creating a Legacy for Generations.” In the evening, conference participants had the opportunity to meet top players from several of the day’s corporate sponsors, including Goldman Sachs, UBS, Bank of America, Lehman Brothers and Citigroup, at a corporate reception— an event less formal than the career fair the conference held in years past.

“We wanted a more intimate setting,” Butler explained. “We want people to connect, to establish relations and to reconnect,” she said, pointing out that many of the same people attend the conference year after year.

The day’s activities concluded with a gala reception and dinner with keynote remarks by Dennis Kimbro, author of Think and Grow Rich: A Black Choice and Daily Motivations for African-American Success, followed by entertainment from soul artists Musiq Soulchild and Eric Roberson.

By Sharon Kasper and Mary-Lea Cox

On Wednesday, Nov. 9, two of the most influential names in development economics—Jeffrey Sachs, and Gareth Stedman Jones—dicated their ideas on ending poverty at a conference and luncheon keynote address, sponsored by Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences.

Sachs, who “think an uneven playing field is an excuse not to play,” has written four books. The Pupin Medal joins a long string of awards and honors, “as there were so many other candidates who at least, if not more, deserved the honor,” he said, pointing out that many of the same people attend the conference year after year. Sachs is optimistic and embraces an Enlightenment view that “the problems of the mind can eradicate poverty”; but he puts the emphasis in a different place—on the importance of science and technology in closing the gap between the haves and have-nots.

“Observing that we now possess the technology to overcome the physical obstacles to ending poverty, Sachs says that we’re neglecting our potential in failing to put that technology to use. For example, we’ve known for some time about the drugs developed in the West, but the patents on these drugs make them scarce and expensive.”

On the Web:
www.columbia.edu/cu/ne wsn/media/05/396_an_end_to_poverty_ Video of Harriman Institute’s poverty debate

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