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## Business Leaders Linked to Encourage New Directions helps young minorities to network

by Matt Vande Bunte | The Grand Rapids Press

Thursday October 30, 2008, 6:48 AM



Press Photo/Katy Batdorff

Members of Business Leaders Linked to Encourage New Directions, from left, Richard Watt, Rodney Martin and Jamon Alexander mingle before their forum Monday evening.

### CASCADE TOWNSHIP --

Growing up in a part of the city where minorities are the majority, Jamon Alexander "was somewhat sheltered to what Grand Rapids really was."

The transition from mostly black Ottawa Hills High School to mostly white Grand Valley State University was an eye-opener.

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Then, as the 2005 graduate made the jump from college to career, he sought familiar footing.

Alexander and some of his peers started **Business Leaders Linked to Encourage New Directions**, or **BLEND**, a social network to help young minority professionals become part of the broader community.

"Getting involved in the social circles is sometimes difficult to break into," said Alexander, 24, who works in fundraising at Spectrum Health.



Press Photo/Katy Batdorff

BLEND members Sonali Allen and Alexis Howard greet each other before their forum Monday evening.

FROM THE PANEL

Advice for making your way in business:

"Choose a career that you're passionate about. Explore the possibilities."

-- Floriza Genautis, CEO and founder of Management Business Solutions

"Find a mentor. That person can pull you aside and say 'This is how it really works.'"

-- Kenyatta Brame, senior vice president, Cascade Engineering

"Roadblocks are often your perception, your reaction to a situation. Your perspective helps you move forward or it can stifle you."

-- Karen Morris, senior vice president, Meijer, Inc.

"In everything that you do, become like a sponge and take in all the knowledge that you can."

-- Johngerlyn Young, donor services director, Grand Rapids Community Foundation

"There is a huge number of opportunities available in health care. Hospitals have a little bit of everything."

-- Mark Iverson, director of organizational integrity, Saint Mary's Health Care

"Your volunteer work is your opportunity to meet a wide array of individuals. You don't learn from those that are just like you, in your same industry. You learn from those who are different."

-- Sonali Allen, vice president of community development, Mercantile Bank



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"We wanted to create an environment where people like us feel welcome in Grand Rapids."

Launched in August 2006, BLEND organizes monthly gatherings for networking, professional development and community service. Recent events included a get-together at a downtown bar and a home-building project with Inner City Christian Federation.

This week, the group met at Cascade Engineering for a panel discussion on "The Changing Face of Executive Leadership."

About 65 people heard advice from business leaders including Grand Rapids City Clerk Lauri Parks, Dickinson Wright attorney Patrick Miles Jr. and Karen Morris, a senior vice president at Meijer Inc.

"We have to learn from what they went through," said Kimberly Howell, 22, a recent Western Michigan University graduate and first-time BLEND attendee who was taking notes.

"Coming out of college, I automatically want to be at the top. (Morris) said it best: 'Be present. Be focused.' You have to be excellent at what you are now."

The target demographic for BLEND is minority professionals ages 22 to 35 but all are welcome. There are no membership fees.

"We wanted to build a solid network (for young professionals of color)," Alexander said. "What we lacked (coming out of school), we wanted to provide that to others."

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