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Execs Offer Insights On Diversity

By: CYNTHIA POST, www.atlantadailyworld.com

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Special Photo

Members of the ADW's inaugural Corporate Diversity Forum panel pose with Atlanta Daily World Publisher M. Alexis Scott (right), who served as moderator. Panel members E. Lamont Houston, senior vice president of customer service and sales at Georgia Power; Leona Barr-Davenport, president of the Atlanta Business League; and

Curley Dossman, president of the Georgia-Pacific Foundation, shared their experiences and offered advice on having a successful career in corporate America.

Much has been done, but there is still more work to do regarding corporate diversity, according to senior executives during a recent diversity forum.

The three executives took part in the Atlanta Daily World's first diversity forum at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta on May 25. The forum was sponsored by the Atlanta Daily World in conjunction with the Atlanta Business League and the Hyatt Regency Atlanta.

Panelists included Leona Barr-Davenport, Atlanta Business League president and CEO; Curley M. Dossman Jr., Georgia-Pacific Foundation president and community programs vice president; and E. Lamont Houston, Georgia Power senior vice president of customer service and sales.

In an intimate gathering, the panel of executives shared their experiences and career paths in a fascinating and moving discussion.

Houston came to work for Georgia Power directly out of Tuskegee University in 1972.

"When I came onboard, I was one of a handful of African American



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engineers," he said. "Some people didn't want to see you fail; on the other hand, some people didn't want to see you succeed, either way sometimes you were given little responsibility."

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Houston has held a number of engineering, supervisory and management positions with the company until being elected as distribution vice president of the Southern Regions in May 2000.

A turning point came when Houston volunteered with the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta and demonstrated his leadership skills.

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"I made a good impression with a fundraising campaign," he said. "It's been an interesting career."

In March 2005, Houston was named vice president of corporate services.

In January 2006, he was named senior vice president of customer service and sales for Georgia Power.

A native of Johnsonville , SC , Barr-Davenport received a bachelor of science degree in business administration and economics from Benedict College in Columbia , SC.

After graduation, she moved to Atlanta and began working at a downtown area business.

"I was the only African American at that particular company," Barr-Davenport said.

Her decision to work with African American business owners led her to the Atlanta Business League as an assistant in 1988.

What was supposed to be a two-year stint with ABL led to her becoming president and CEO of the organization.

The panel of executives answered several questions in a discussion regarding corporate America 's commitment to diversity.

Dossman, who came from Louisiana to Atlanta to attend Morehouse College , said, "all progress is driven by change," he said. "With a diverse workforce, people bring their ideas to the table. We still have a lot of work to do."

Diversity is not about Black and White, Barr-Davenport said.

"There are so many different angles -mothers versus single mothers, mothers versus non-mothers, men versus women," she said. "Women must continue to address the perception they cannot compete with men on the same level."

However, those working to advance diversity in the workforce should "be careful not to focus on an agenda," Dossman said.

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"Future success depends on a diverse business environment," Houston said. "We have to understand how people work, how they want to work, how they are willing to work."

There is a strain on the aging U.S. workforce yet there are ways to compete in an increasingly global economy, the executives agreed.

"It is vital to have an educated workforce, particularly African American males," Dossman said. "We have to capture kids early in our schools and intervene in their lives."

Dossman cited the efforts of the Georgia-Pacific Foundation's involvement with the Atlanta Public Schools; Barr-Davenport also mentioned the Atlanta Business League's program to provide youth opportunities to "shadow" African American entrepreneurs.

"At Georgia Power, we have bright, educated young people who are committed and have a desire to succeed," Houston said. "We have to steer more young people into vocational careers."

The discussion ended with the panelists addressing a controversial question of how to address White privilege in corporate America .

"There are still some areas where you do not see people of color," Barr-Davenport said. "A company's efforts in advancing diversity has to be tied to compensation; that is when you will see change."

Houston suggested continued dialogue as another possible solution.

"There was a time when diversity was not an issue," Houston said. "Today, the choice is how to integrate those differences."

"You have to continue to push the envelope in what you need to do business," he continued. "You have to be comfortable with change. Georgia Power has come a long way but there is still a long way to go. Quitting is not an option."

Dossman praised the role of historically Black colleges and universities as a potential solution.

"They are so important by instilling students with values that will serve them well in life," he said.

This year's theme was "Lessons Learned and Advice for the Next Generation." Atlanta Daily World Publisher & CEO M. Alexis Scott moderated the panel.