

Making a difference by Allen White

The Fort Worth Metropolitan Black Chamber of Commerce (FWMBCC), founded in 1979 with a core mission of making Fort Worth a better place for families and workers, plays a pivotal role in promoting economic and business development in the area. Their focus areas include education and economics, and they actively engage in program development and community involvement to maximize Fort Worth's economic potential while maintaining a high quality of life.

The FWMBCC boasts a diverse team consisting of former corporate executives, seasoned entrepreneurs and community leaders, all working together under dynamic leadership. Over the years, the organization has transformed from its construction-oriented roots into a vital resource for local businesses, providing professional development opportunities for its members.

Led for many years by Devoyd Jennings, his death in July 2021 led the chamber seeking new leadership to fill his position. Michelle Green Ford had recently served as vice president and chief diversity officer at JPS Health Network and had been an entrepreneur herself. She was approached by executive recruiter Marnese Barksdale Elder and asked to consider accepting the position of CEO and president. Barksdale explained the value of her previous experiences made her a perfect fit for the job. After some deep soul searching, Green Ford decided the next phase of her career would be focused on leaving a legacy through serving the community. This service would allow her to fulfill her passion for helping small businesses, so it was a double win to accept the position.

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Green Ford began her journey with the chamber in January 2022 with only two remaining employees, Barbara Bolden and Bob Ray Sanders. The board was in a transition year and those positions needed to be filled quickly and the remaining staff positions had to be filled as well. She was in no way intimidated by these voids and immediately got to work recruiting both staff and board members.

Bolden, who had been with the chamber for 20 years, stayed on to ensure the stability of the chamber and continue in her mission to ensure its success. Sanders had retired from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* and received a call from Devoyd Jennings asking for his help. "Just a



Michelle Green Ford

Photo by Steve Rochun

few hours a week," Jennings told him. With their previous relationship extending back to high school, Sanders just couldn't say no. He has been with the chamber ever since, serving as the director of communications and marketing.

To fill open staff slots, Green Ford interviewed several and finally called people she knew and had worked with previously. She called upon previous city employee Cheryl Jones who, at the time, was a compliance officer in the small business equity division of the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion department. Jones had helped coach Green Ford during her participation in the first Fort Worth Business Plan competition, developed by Jones during her tenure as manager of the small business initiative at the Devoyd Jennings Business Assistance Center for the city's economic development department. Jones joined the FWMBCC staff as the director of membership and revenue management. She saw it as an opportunity to use her skills and contacts to add value to chamber programs while fulfilling her love of helping others and making a difference.

The final slot in the executive staff was filled by William Johnson, formerly the manager of supplier diversity at JPS Health Network. Green Ford and Johnson were classmates in elementary school at AM Pate and in high school at Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Still salty about losing a spelling bee to Johnson, Green Jones, nevertheless realized he would be an asset to the team. They maintained a friendship through the years as their paths crossed in their various professional roles. Johnson had prior business relationships with Bolden, Sanders and Jones as well, so his

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entrance as director of economic development and compliance was the final piece in the puzzle and made for almost instant chemistry among all of them.

Every member of the team brings their own unique qualities to the table to enhance and grow the chamber. Bolden's more than 20-year tenure with the chamber equipped her with the skills and ability to enhance the work being done at the chamber. She knows the hows and whys of what has been done and can pivot and help the team with what needs to be done. She is also the one that keeps the team and chamber members smiling with her infectious laugh. Sanders' longtime journalism experience cannot be overstated, but his biggest contribution is his historical knowledge of the Fort Worth community. His memories of historical events, institutions and organizations are unmatched, as are his personal experiences of economic development (or lack thereof) in the Black community. Jones' experience with partner collaborations and member engagement makes her the perfect fit for her position. She is using her skills in programming, training, finance and small business development to help both existing and new chamber members. Johnson happily contributes his knowledge and experience to help progress African American and other ethnic and women-owned businesses. He looks forward to advocating from the chamber side of the economic equation for a change. Green Ford brings her previous leadership and entrepreneurship to the table which she believes will help produce superior results for the FWMBCC. She is able to leverage her diverse experiences which include, but are not limited to, owning a training and consulting company which dealt with large corporations and municipalities. Her BBA in business management and MBA in strategic leadership prepared her to recruit, train and manage team relationships and perform strategic planning, business forecasting and marketing analysis. Finally, most of the team are natives of Fort Worth and have a deep love of the city and the relationships they have formed within the city.

This executive staff is meshing their individual talents and working to build upon the framework left by Devoyd Jennings and previous staff members. "I would like to acknowledge the solid foundation that was established for us to build on," says Green Ford. The staff all agree that he left not only a legacy (as attested by the renaming of their current facility in his honor) but he left the framework behind which has put them in position to grow and expand the chamber without having to start from scratch. Under this team, membership has grown significantly, both business members and corporate sponsors, revenue has increased and they have several new programs rolling out to help the economic development of small businesses. Together they have worked tirelessly on the already established events of the annual luncheon and golf tournaments. These two events have seen greater than before



Staff of the Fort Worth Metropolitan Black Chamber of Commerce

Photos by Steve Rochun

participation from both chamber members and corporate partners to the tune of more than 900 in attendance at the 2023 luncheon. This team is also responsible for the inaugural Black history celebration, a Sneaker Ball in February 2023 which was a sold-out event, well received by the Fort Worth community.

This group of people has a strong desire to grow the chamber and increase its presence and contributions to the community and are working diligently to leave behind a lasting legacy of their own so that future generations can continue to build on the foundation that was left to them. They already see some of the fruit of their labors. In 2023, for the first time in its existence, the FWMBCC was awarded Chamber of the Year by the Texas Association of African American Chamber of Commerce, an honor they received after working together for only 16 months. "It makes me feel like we are on the right track and actually making a difference in our community," says Jones. The community concurs; they are making a difference.