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February 2007: Black History Month

nowhere to stop



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Road trips were dangerous for Black people for more than 70 percent of the twentieth century. Along the journey, not only were there separate drinking fountains for people of color, but there were also separate bathrooms labeled "White Men," "White Women," and "Colored."

...by Rosalyn J. McPherson

IN AUGUST OF 1992, my parents escorted me on a very significant journey. I was headed to Baton Rouge, Louisiana to enroll my son, my first born, as a freshman in college. We were excited and proud since this child would become the third generation to enter Southern University.

My parents picked me up from my New Jersey home and we pointed the Cadillac south. It felt just like old times when my dad loaded up the family for the drive to reconnect with our relatives and our roots.

Because my father had recently suffered a stroke, he was unable to drive for more than an hour, and I took over soon after we crossed over into Delaware. I settled in for the long ride, propelled by excitement at this

important family milestone.

About an hour later dad asked to stop for the bathroom. "No," I replied. He looked at me with a weak but curious smile.

"That's what you used to tell us when we were kids and we needed to go to the bathroom when you were driving us down South," I explained, and then burst into laughter. The tension of the moment was over, but then it took another intense turn when he replied, "There was nowhere to stop."

I was deeply moved by the answer because I immediately understood something very clearly for the first time in forty-some years.

In the 1950s and 60s, we were a young family traveling through the deeply segregated South. Road trips were dangerous for Black people for more than 70 percent of the twentieth century. Along the journey, not only were there separate drinking fountains for people of color, but there were also separate bathrooms labeled, "White Men," "White Women," and "Colored." I remember because I was reading by three years of age.

The most humiliating part of those trips was that we were not allowed to stay in hotels during those times either. I can remember my parents traveling for long hours and then looking for directions to the black neighborhood where some kind church-going family would put us up for the night. Sometimes dad simply slept for a few hours by the roadside.

It had not occurred to me that my parents were attempting to shield us from the humiliation of being relegated to a "colored" toilet. Over the years, it had never dawned on me that my Dad traveled with a certain amount of stress and tension, not wanting to be stopped by a state trooper for no apparent reason other than "driving while black." As a young child traveling with a bladder "bout to burst," I had simply felt that dad was being mean and stern with his simple "no." Instead, I had been waiting for the opportunity to pay him back forty years later.

In the flash of those few seconds when my dad's simple statement, "no place to stop" registered, I retorted in an almost child-like voice, "Daddy, that was all you had to say." In other words, I wished that I had not felt that he was being so harsh on us for all those years.

The impact had been more traumatizing and far-reaching for me than he could have ever dreamed. It was those negative experiences that had turned me off to long distance car trips, preferring to by-pass the bonding and scenic observations that come with a family car trip. Instead, I had always preferred flying and reaching my destination as quickly as possible.

As a child of a military family, I was fortunate enough to have other travel adventures outside of the United States that enabled me to form additional personal observations. I understood that my family and I had not come face to face with this kind of prejudice when we lived in France. There were no signs on the highway that separated us by race. As a matter of fact, we stayed in many hotels and were treated really well by the French. As a

young child I paid attention, but I dared not ask about these inequities.

The memories of childhood travel remained deep in my subconscious and have shaped my patterns as an adult business traveler. The early years of my career took place during the seventies, a mere decade after the passage of the Voting Rights Act. The remnants of the rules of segregation were still very much in place. There were, in fact, places that still did not want me, even if by law they had to let me stay at their hotel. I feared this more on trips below the Mason Dixon line.

During my early years of business travel, I often checked into places where I immediately felt uncomfortable, possibly not welcome. When I approached the front desk, I feared that someone would think that I was applying for one of the housekeeping jobs. I once checked into a motel, and loaded down with luggage, walked a long corridor to get to my room. I was away from the comforts of home and terrified, not knowing who or what could be lurking along that hallway. I had been scarred by the rules of a segregated South.

At that point, I decided that there were certain criteria that I required if I was to keep my sanity while traveling. Call me a diva if you want, but I prefer a hotel with 24-hour room service. I want to know that a bellman can escort me to my room in an unfamiliar place, providing security, not just lugging my bags. I need to stay in a place where the sheets feel more like the ones I have on my own bed. As a discriminating traveler, I seek comfort and, most importantly, safety - no matter where I stay.

Hotels have come a long way in today's world, and welcome the dollars of all of their potential customers. Thankfully, I no longer need to travel across the tracks in search of the good Christian black family willing to put me up for the night - unless I choose to do so. Most reputable hotels provide a sense of safety and security, and many offer fabulous programs for families traveling with children and great business amenities for the road warriors.

Today, my family can now fully enjoy the beauty of our country in a way that was once forbidden to African Americans. It is comforting to know that we can check into wonderful hotels from New York to New Orleans, to Charleston to San Francisco - and be warmly welcomed by a friendly staff of people from all four corners of the globe.

Rosalyn J. McPherson is president and founder of The ROZ Group, Inc., specializing in creative consulting, educational marketing, and the business development and management strategies of socially responsible products and services. The ROZ Group offers conceptual communication for corporate, nonprofit, and community clientele, with an intercultural sensitivity and understanding. She is accessible via therozgroup.com.

direct access

Unbeknownst to most people of regular stature, many everyday tasks that are taken for granted can be quite difficult for Little People, such as pushing

elevator buttons, hanging up clothes, or even sitting on the bed. Working with Direct Access Solutions, Carmen Baker, formerly vice president of Diversity for Carlson Hotels Worldwide and now serving in a diversity role for the entire corporation, made it her mission to educate the company on the importance of proactively reaching out to people who experience these challenges while traveling.

...by Maria Seiler

IF YOU ASK THE AVERAGE PERSON to define the word diversity, the answer would most likely focus on racial or cultural issues. After all, organizations practicing diversity often tend to center around different ethnic backgrounds, ensuring all perspectives are represented. This is certainly a positive view of diversity, and speaks to the valuable impact of these initiatives on corporate America and specifically, the hospitality industry.

Fortunately, in today's business environment, people are continually learning about the benefits of implementing this affirmative outlook on diversity, but are realizing that the true diversity of our customers and employees goes much further.

As an organization that champions diversity at every level, Carlson Hotels Worldwide has greatly expanded its view to celebrate and embrace diversity of background, thought, and gender, along with physical challenges and abilities.

In fact, Carlson has joined other hotel companies to work with many United States organizations that promote diversity, such as the MultiCultural Foodservice and Hospitality Alliance; the National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators & Developers; the Asian American Hotel Owners Association; the Urban League; and the sponsorship of student scholarships at many leading hotel schools, and through the United Negro College Fund.

In an effort to further promote diversity, Carlson wanted to develop additional programs for a group that deserves greater attention - those with disabilities. In the U.S. alone, these individuals number more than 52 million. During our research, we specifically learned of the unique challenges of travelers who are short statured (4'10" or shorter), or have one of more than 200 forms of dwarfism.

This past year, we were approached by a representative of Direct Access Solutions, a company that specializes in producing accessibility products for Little People who travel. Along with Little People of America, Inc. (LPA), Direct Access Solutions urged us to test and implement an assistive convenience kit at our hotels. In doing so, we broadened our thinking about diversity. Thankfully, Matt Roloff, the founder of Direct Access Solutions, took the time and initiative to inform us about his assistive convenience kit and how it could greatly help people like him with dwarfism. He developed and perfected the kit with feedback from attendees at numerous Little People of America annual conferences and meetings. Our connection with Matt (and his convenience kit) is now making a positive impact on the way we do business.

Unbeknownst to most people of regular stature, many every day tasks that are taken for granted can be quite difficult for Little People, such as pushing elevator buttons, hanging up clothes, or even sitting on the bed. Through several discussions with Direct Access Solutions, Carmen Baker, formerly vice president of Diversity for Carlson Hotels Worldwide and now serving in a diversity role for the entire corporation, made it her mission to educate the company on the importance of addressing this issue and proactively reaching out to people who experience these challenges while traveling.

Through her efforts, Carlson Hotels has tested and planned to introduce the In-Room Assistive Convenience Kits throughout the Americas at all Radisson Hotels and Resorts and Park Plaza Hotels and Resorts, and at select service Country Inns & Suites by Carlson hotels and Park Inn hotels with more than 120 rooms. It's a program that is already being celebrated by the disability community, and one that reinforces Carlson's commitment to embracing diversity at every level of the company.

Expanding the accessibility of these convenience kits is clearly great for business because it makes Little People feel extremely welcome at our hotels - but this initiative has had a broader impact than we originally intended. In addition those of short stature, we learned these kits have the potential to assist a much larger group of travelers with disabilities - anyone from people in wheelchairs to the elderly who suffer from severe arthritis. In this way, this experience has been invaluable in opening our eyes to an expanded view of diversity and creating more dialogue within the company about catering to the increasingly diverse community that we serve.

In order to meet the needs of a changing world, it is essential to think outside of the box and invite more people to the table to share their ideas. Taking the time to listen to different viewpoints - even the difficult ones that challenge conventional thinking and identify shortcomings in your organization - can produce unexpected benefits. After all, isn't that what diversity is really about?

Maria Seiler is Vice President of Diversity at Carlson Hotels Worldwide.

perspective

Supplier diversity programs do work - if both vendors and corporations do their homework. Here are some tips for minority businesses looking to partner with the hotel industry.

...by Fred Lona

IN MY EXPERIENCE, I have found that many minority and women-owned business executives (M/WBEs) - even experienced ones - believe that corporate supplier diversity programs simply do not work. I strongly feel that this perception is incorrect, and through education and familiarity with unique processes, minority enterprises can certainly enjoy the benefits

of these programs.

Over the years, my career in the field has provided me with a solid foundation of expertise in working successfully with minority-owned businesses. I recommend these quick tips as a basic reference guide for those who want to succeed in the area of obtaining contracts with hotel companies, along with other major corporations.

1. Differentiate yourself from your competitors. It is necessary for minority-owned business to offer higher value, better products, more services, and superior quality. Focus on your core competencies. And please don't forget to provide your W/MBE certification data.
2. Know your market. This seems simple, but it is essential! Learn the business and be sure the products and services you are offering fits your target company's buying patterns. In addition, it is important to "speak the industry's language," which demonstrates your knowledge and helps to create credibility. For example, Hilton hotels, with more than 2,800 properties and almost half a million rooms, is unlikely to buy mattresses from a local supplier. However, the company may be interested in purchasing regional food products, specialized printing, and commodity services at the local level. And yes, you could be the supplier!
3. Do your homework. Familiarize yourself with the procurement process. Be competitive in your pricing, and offer solutions instead of just products or general services. The W/MBE status will open the door, but remember that competency and competitiveness will get you a contract.
4. Prove your reliability. Make sure your business plan and financial information shows that you have room to grow your business. Assure your future clients that you can offer a steady and timely supply of products and services. You must always be ready to prove your reliability and financial worthiness.
5. Ask for help. Supplier diversity specialists are available to assist W/MBEs to be more competitive and win those contracts. Be certain that you know your target customer's needs and requirements. Network and connect with other M/WBEs to learn what was pivotal in securing their own contracts.
6. Educate yourself. Keep in mind that every organization has its own culture and operates differently. Therefore, it is necessary for you to truly understand how the decision-making process works within that company. Often, the supplier's diversity contact makes the introduction; and then the procurement team makes the decision. Treat all sales efforts professionally, and get to know the sales influencers. When in doubt, ask and act accordingly.

In addition to these tips, I have found corporate Websites to be a very useful resource. Not only will they give insight into the company and its culture, but many organizations feature special supplier diversity sections online.

After learning as much as possible about the company, and making your initial contacts, it is essential to build relationships and be respectfully persistent. You'll be pleasantly surprised at your positive results.

Finally, maintain a positive outlook and keep in mind that large corporations really want to do business with you, but only if you are ready for them!

Fred Lona is Director of Supplier Diversity for Hilton Supply Management.

fast facts

More than 200 hotels in the United States are currently owned by African Americans.

African Americans spend 40 billion dollars annually on travel.

- National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators and Developers (NABHOOD).

prism

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Prism is a quarterly newsletter celebrating the diversity of people, ideas, and cultures within the hotel industry. Produced in consultation with AH&LA's Multicultural & Diversity Advisory Council, *Prism* shows how individuals from every background are building dynamic careers, reshaping convention, and creating a new, more inclusive era for lodging. *Prism* also underscores the benefits of pursuing a diverse employee, vendor, and customer base. « «

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Your input is valuable. Please send story ideas, suggestions, and quotable comments to jmaccaro@ahla.com.