

## More Blacks must become entrepreneurs; MUL chief takes area corporations to task

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.  
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Economic empowerment is the next phase of the civil rights movement.

That is the message Minneapolis Urban League President Scott Gray is trying to convey to the area's African-American community. Gray, who came to Minneapolis from Milwaukee, said he is accustomed to seeing a plethora of African-American owned businesses in other major metropolitan cities and thinks it's past time that Minneapolis and the surrounding areas produce more African-American entrepreneurs.

"There's a lack of ownership in this area when you look at financial services, retail, manufacturing, entertainment; you see very few people of color, specifically African-Americans owning businesses of sizable scale that employ more than themselves," said Gray. "I grew up in Milwaukee and in my neighborhood there was a Black dry cleaner, a Black grocery store; you could feel a sense of ownership."

Gray said the African-American business void actually presents unique opportunities for enterprising individuals willing to strike out on their own.

"The question is, as the Urban League, what role do we play in this. We should have a role in economic development and fostering business growth. Maybe at some point the Urban League is a business investor or partner in creating some of these businesses," said Gray. "That's certainly a way to create jobs. We can't rely solely on others to employ us. There's a lot of opportunity, but a lot of work to be done."

Gray speculates that one of the reasons that so few African-Americans own businesses in this area is because the landscape is dominated by large corporations and many get indoctrinated with a corporate worker mentality; not one of an owner mentality.

"It's very hard to think ownership outside of the corporate culture," said the Minneapolis Urban

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League president, who moved to the Twin Cities in 2009. "In a lot of respects the people working for a Cargill, Target, Best Buy; they have the tools to be entrepreneurs. In many ways they are running a business within a big corporation."

Gray said the area's giant corporations are not doing enough to foster the creation and growth of African-American businesses. The Minneapolis Urban League head said in asking corporations to invest in business start-ups it's not about creating their own competition, but about being a good community partner. Gray said corporations in other communities are already investing in minority-owned businesses as a part of their overall growth strategies.

"In places like St. Louis, there're a lot more (African-Americans) so an Anheuser-Busch or an Enterprise; they see us as an emerging customer," said Gray. "And I can say in the places like Chicago and Milwaukee (large corporations) have a different level of community involvement. Here you see corporations that are doing business across the world and the question isn't, 'are they doing things in this community,' the question is, 'are they doing enough.'" If a company is satisfied with the amount of work they are doing in our community with the type of disparities we have here, then shame on them, added Gray.

Gray said with so many major corporations centered in the Twin Cities and the economic disparities what they are; it's easy to see how it can affect the mindset of many if the area's African-American community.

"It's got to be frustrating to be so close to the opportunities but not be able to achieve it. It's spirit killing," said Gray. "Target headquarters is right downtown (in Minneapolis). You can almost walk to the headquarters of General Mills from north Minneapolis and you as a Black person living here is saying, 'Why can't I get in?'"