

Caseworker answered calling through Caring Place, Chamber ** Mary Griffin: Founder, African-American Chamber of Commerce

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Mary Griffin learned about community when she "adopted" three troubled children when she was only 26.

At the time, almost 20 years ago, she was on staff at Valley Wide Help, a hot line and answering service for social agencies. "People would call us before they called 911," Griffin said.

One snowy night, working a double shift because no one else could make it in, she answered a call from a 12-year-old boy who was threatening suicide. The next day, Griffin brought the boy -- and his brother and sister -- to her home in Allentown to live as a family.

Although it was sometimes difficult, the children stayed with Griffin until their mother got back on her feet. "[I'll] remember grilled cheese sandwiches forever," Griffin said.

Today, two of the siblings are college graduates and one is in the Air Force.

"That was the bridge," said Griffin of the part she played in helping to change people's lives for the better.

Now, when she talks about her vision for the Lehigh Valley African- American Chamber of Commerce, she talks about its potential for creating and strengthening community.

"The Lehigh Valley African-American Chamber of Commerce serves two purposes: community and business. You can't have community without businesses," said Griffin, who founded the chamber early last year.

About 100 businesses are on the chamber's mailing list and may partake in chamber activities, although less than one-third pay its membership fee. Many are so small they just can't afford it, Griffin said.

Griffin knows the importance of community because when she grew up in Upper Milford Township, hers was one of the few African-American families "out there," she said. Her mother, Anna Boyer, grew up in the country, too, and "actually learned Pennsylvania Dutch, because that's what the schools were."

Going to school remained challenging for the family, said Griffin, who graduated from Emmaus High School in 1977. "For 12 years, our name was the 'n' word, but our mother felt that this was the world, and that we had to learn how to cope with it. But we had a wonderful balance at home. Our mother taught us that it's not a 'race' thing, it's a 'people' thing."

Griffin said her mother taught her and her siblings about values and people. "First, you have God, then you have family and friends."

And you have faith. "My mother's faith came from having five children with no father," said Griffin, whose father died when she was 6 years old. Afterward, Anna Boyer supported her family by cleaning houses and baking pies for restaurants.

"I learned from my mother that you always have enough for someone else," said Griffin, adding that her mother took in other children and invited guests to the table.

After studying horticulture at Lehigh County Vocational-Technical School (she sold floral arrangements from home before she was 18), Griffin managed a flower shop in Allentown, worked as a phone operator for Greyhound bus company and was an American Red Cross caseworker.

While working as a drug and alcohol prevention specialist with the Allentown Housing Authority, she felt called to find another way to help young people.

At the time, she and her husband, Steven, had a new baby, a new house in Whitehall Township and a new car. Leaving her job at the housing authority was a total act of faith, she said. "There wasn't a question of 'Should I?'"

Griffin cashed in her insurance policies and wrote a business plan for a youth development agency. The Caring Place opened at 931 Hamilton St. in downtown Allentown in 1996.

Several years later, she said God gave her the idea to start the African-American Chamber of Commerce as a way of gathering people together. She felt she was

an unlikely choice for such a task. "I'm from Emmaus, I don't know the Allentown community," she thought at the time.

But she called her pastor, the Rev. Randy Landis of Church on the Move in Allentown. "He said, "Mary, do whatever God asks,"" Griffin said. "It's unusual to be around someone who is so secure in the certainty of her vision," said Phyllis Alexander, former executive director of the Allentown Human Relations Commission. Griffin calls Alexander her mentor.

"Even if the present is difficult, Griffin has the long view and keeps moving forward. Her emotional strength comes from her spirituality," said Alexander, who is president of The Caring Place board.

Of the African-American chamber, Alexander said, "Clearly there is a need for the African-American community to be involved in its own economic development."

The African-American Chamber is working on that sense of community by having meetings once a month and mixers every three months, where business owners can meet one another. "We didn't even know where all our African-American businesses are. Some are storefronts, some are in people's homes. I just found out there is an African-American day spa in Easton," said Griffin.

She also last month helped arrange a two-year trial merger with the recently renamed Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce.

"The African-American chamber, as with any business group, will only serve to strengthen the entire Lehigh Valley economic outlook," said Tamara Weller, vice president of administration for the Lehigh Valley Chamber.

Over the next two years, founder Mary Griffin hopes that the Lehigh Valley African-American Chamber of Commerce can hire a full-time executive director and secretary. As it grows, the organization will be able to tap into more financial resources such as loans, and programs for the minority business members.

Future services include conferences, a newsletter, a business directory and a pool of banking, accounting and legal expertise for members to access. Last month, the group arranged a two-year trial merger with the Lehigh County Chamber of Commerce. The African-American businesses will now be eligible for health care and other benefits through the larger chamber.

Griffin has taken initial steps to open a second Caring Place, the youth development program that she directs, at a church in Englewood, Calif. In the future, she hopes to open others in Chicago, Washington and Philadelphia.

But first, she needs to find crucial funding for the Allentown location. "We went from 250 to 400 children in a year, but we had to lay off two people because we lost funding. We are growing, but the money's not here yet."

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610-820-6754 MARY GRIFFIN Background: President and founder, Lehigh Valley African-American Chamber of Commerce. Founder and executive director, the Caring Place, Allentown, a city youth development agency offering free mentoring, tutoring, career counseling and other special programs.

Current challenge: "Money," said Griffin, who pays some expenses for both agencies out of her own pocket.

Quote: "The Lehigh Valley African-American Chamber of Commerce serves two purposes: community and business. You can't have community without businesses."

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