

Friends share mission of advocating for quality education

by Jennifer Holder

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Chanda Smith and Tiffany Green are co-founders of the Minnesota chapter of Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), a national nonprofit membership organization whose mission is to actively support parental choice to empower families and increase quality educational options for Black children.

Chanda and Tiffany are also close friends who encourage, respect, and support each other. Chanda, 36 years old, is the mother of three — ages 14, 12 and eight. Tiffany, 31, is engaged to be married soon. Both women met three years ago at a BAEO educational symposium that addressed the conditions of Black students. “This is needed in Minnesota,” they deduced simultaneously. Tiffany and Chanda are extremely passionate about education and the power of community involvement.

Chanda graduated from Minneapolis North High School out of the Summatech math and science program. Her struggles in that program influenced how she thought of herself, and it led to her recognition that an encouraging school environment is essential for a child’s success. As a parent, she says, she is very careful about the school that her children attend and is hypersensitive to their teachers’ encouragement.

“Education was my way out,” said Tiffany, who is from a single-parent household in Chicago. In her position as a policy aid at Minneapolis City Hall, she saw firsthand the disparities in education and how it impacted people’s lives and the decisions they made. She observed that Blacks were discussing having the same problems today as they did during the Civil Rights Movement. “We are making the same mistakes,” she said.

“If we choose to do something like BAEO that will attract Black communities, we could make a difference,” Tiffany decided. Recovering from the loss of a child, she believed it was the right time for her to do something.

At about the same time, Chanda’s kids were transitioning in school, and for the first time, she felt at a loss as to what she needed to do regarding placement of her children in school. So, she also decided she needed to join BAEO.

Chanda, a vice president at Pillsbury United Communities, spends “an unbelievable amount of time on BAEO. Being busy doesn’t mean anything. It’s what you give time to that grows; and I have grown in so many ways as a woman and a community person. I have also become increasingly more understanding of circumstances that people are facing.”

Determination, Tiffany reflected, is her greatest strength, and she is most proud of her accomplishments along her career path. She found her dream job that blends her passion for design and education through an Internet search. She is the educational planner with Fielding Nair International and director of communications for Design Share.com. “Everything I had done was leading to that moment to connect with this company. It’s unbelievable what I’ve learned in just six months.”

“I am most proud of getting my master’s [degree] as a single parent and working full time,” said Chanda. She did that for herself, for her children, and also for her community. “I am a kid person — always doing something with kids,” she continued, “from working in the community and seeing kids spiraling down, and I felt a larger sense of responsibility.”

“We have to look at each other as a community and we really have to lift each other up. We have to take care of our own; they haven’t been taken care of,” said Chanda.

Tiffany agreed with her: “We don’t have all the answers, but we’re taking the risks. It’s not about them; it’s about us; it’s about self-empowerment. Take an interest in somebody and that will make a big difference.”

“We were called,” reflected Tiffany and Chanda.

For more information about BAEO, visit <http://minnesota.baeo.org>.

Jennifer Holder welcomes reader responses to jholder@spokesman-recorder.com.