

Inspiring the Aspiring

by Elizabeth Milnikel

On April 26, 2007, the IJ Clinic on Entrepreneurship in Chicago hosted its first-ever citywide conference, entitled “Growing Opportunities: Fostering Inner-City Entrepreneurship in Chicago.” The invitations and banner invited all the participants to “start it up!” And, throughout the day, the speakers and audience members accepted that invitation to start up conversations, envision new ventures, form new relationships, and take new ideas into action.



As we had hoped, the conference brought together people from a variety of sectors, who were united by their common passion for supporting inner-city entrepreneurship. The panels and the audience included inner-city residents who dream of building vital businesses, professors, bankers, business advisors, and policymakers. As a result, the conversation encompassed the scientific data about existing businesses in poor communities in Chicago, business strategies for building a solid new enterprise, recommendations for government programs, and personal stories of entrepreneurs’ struggles and inspirations.

Early on in the day, a former IJ Clinic client stood up from the audience to bear witness. He introduced himself as Mike Davis, one of the founders of Tasty Delite, which makes seasoned coating mixes for chicken, pork, and fish. Tasty Delite and two other IJ Clinic clients were portrayed in a short film that kicked off the conference. Davis and his co-founder Darryl Brown are role models for many new entrepreneurs, because they have broken through so many

barriers to own their own plant, employ a dozen workers, and negotiate with nationwide grocers and Wal-Mart. Davis shared with the audience that the growing business is still a struggle but also a great source of pride.

“You’re talking about being an entrepreneur,” he said. “It ain’t no joke. People are gonna tell you, go on, get a job. But it’s bigger than that.... It’s about creating jobs. That’s what it’s all about, not just about helping yourself, but creating jobs and helping your community.” He sincerely thanked the IJ Clinic in particular for giving entrepreneurs the support they need to turn around and build wealth in the greater community.

Themes summarized so pointedly by Mr. Davis—the daunting challenges faced by inner city entrepreneurs and the incredible value they create—were expanded throughout the day. It was particularly moving to hear entrepreneurs speak about their role models (and where they had to forge ahead without any role model to consult). IJ Clinic client Julie Welborn, who is struggling through the early stages building out a cafe and bakery in a strip of vacant buildings and fast food drive-throughs, thanked her father for teaching her to be patient. “How long does patience last?” she asked.



“I don’t know; I just know my father said ‘Be patient.’” She relies on her faith and passion to sustain her patience as she structures her business: “The roots have to be formed, and you don’t see anything all this time, and then all of a sudden you have this beautiful tree.”

Nadine Thompson, the keynote speaker, has built a multi-million dollar corporation on the entrepreneurial spirit of individuals all over the country. Individual consultants—mostly African-American women—sell Warm Spirit products



in the manner they think will be most successful, and they learn how to run a business at the same time.

Ms. Thompson too talked about the entrepreneurs or would-be entrepreneurs she has known who inspired her. As a young girl in a community of immigrants, Ms. Thompson heard countless stories of young women struggling to find employment in the careers for which they trained in their home countries. Many had to start their own businesses to survive, and it was critical that they had skills as hair braiders or seamstresses to build lives for themselves in a new country.

As Chip Mellor reminded us in his welcome address, it is “absolutely essential that [entrepreneurs] be unshackled, able to do whatever it takes to make their dreams reality.” We were surrounded by big dreamers on April 26, 2007. We were thrilled to give them an opportunity to support one another and challenge one another. And we were honored to announce that IJ is here to help them fight for their dreams.