

# Consortium encourages black-owned businesses

BY TIM CARVELL  
STAFF WRITER

Joe Lee runs an Allstate insurance agency.

He makes many deals on the telephone.

"Sometimes," he said, "a customer will agree to something on the phone, then come in, look at me and break the deal."

Perhaps, Lee said, it has something to do with the fact that he is black.

Lee's story is but one example of the many obstacles that face black business owners, obstacles which the Oakland County Business Consortium (OCBC) was created to combat.

When a group of Southfield business owners founded the OCBC in 1984, their purpose was to encourage black-owned businesses in Oakland County. Since then, the consortium's ranks have increased

from a handful of members to 145, many of whom have stories to tell about their involvement.

Lee, who currently serves the consortium as vice-president, is no exception.

"When I first found the OCBC," Lee said, "an individual just walked up to me and asked, would I be interested in a business?" That conversation led to Lee's investment in Creative Detroit Bites, the country's first black-owned venture and capital company.

That sort of networking is precisely what Barbara Talley, former Southfield council member, had in mind when she helped found the organization.

"There were 75 firms that we identified that did not know the others existed," she said. In return for their \$50 per year dues, the OCBC's members receive monthly workshops, networking op-

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Barbara Talley



she saw how the bidding process worked against businesses founded by minorities.

portunities and, particularly important, access to state and county bid offers.

This access, Talley said, was particularly important. When she worked in government, Talley said

with government contractors. This, however, means that many such businesses won't last long enough to establish themselves. Catch-22.

The OCBC helps its members by spending time and effort on obtaining bid information from the government, then supplying it to members.

Talley said such assistance, coupled with the OCBC's vocal support of its members, has opened up business opportunities in the county.

"The bidding process in Oakland County was not as open as it could have been," she said, listing instances in which contracts were not opened to the general business public for bidding.

"The Oakland County Development office has a wealth of information," she said. "We have not had access to that information because we have not been in the mainstream long enough to do so."

To do so, according to OCBC president James Ralph, black entrepreneurs need to organize their efforts.

"There's strength in numbers," he said. "When one black business owner goes to the state and asks for greater patronage of black businesses, it won't happen. When many go, then things happen."

The OCBC, Ralph said, fills a niche which other groups have left empty.

"There are all types of business organizations," Ralph said. "Different organizations have different agendas. There are a lot of things that are not addressed in the Chamber of Commerce that could be addressed in the OCBC."

A strong business network is especially important during tough times, like the recent recession, said economist and OCBC member Carl Gregory.

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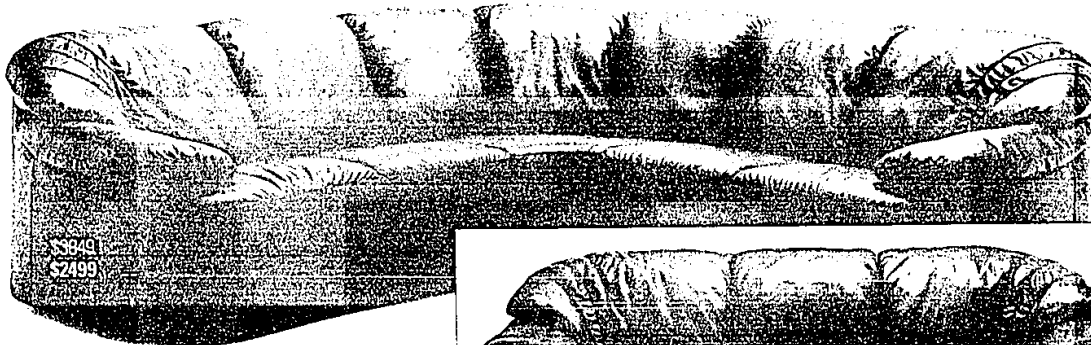
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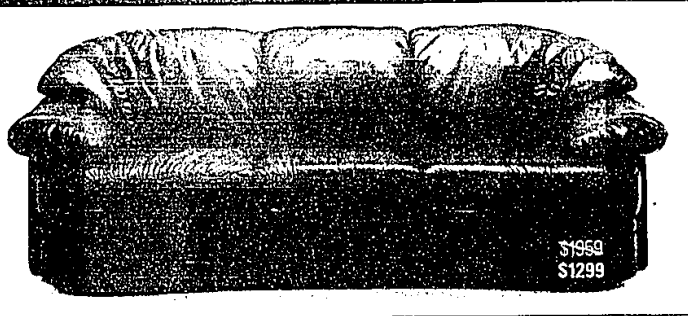
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