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Inclusiveness goal put in hands of Chamber's Rodgers

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A few hours before Pat Rodgers strode into the spotlight as chair of the Charlotte Chamber last week, one of her longtime pals mused about a fragile issue that Rodgers will need to confront as the business community's most visible leader.

"We've always prided ourselves on racial inclusion," Hugh McColl Jr. was saying. "Back in the '60s, we marched together, and this city made a lot of progress. I worry that it's moved off the agenda, when it needs to be high on our agenda."

McColl, the former chairman of Bank of America, continued: "But I really can't think of a better leader for the times than Pat Rodgers. I mean, it's not like her company was always giant - it was a small business, so she understands the issues. And she is known to not only speak the truth, but to listen to the truth."

The truth is that over the past year, Charlotte's business leaders have been poking around the issue of how to expand the city's tiny class of minority-owned businesses.

To his credit, it was Rodgers' predecessor, David Darnell, who was gutsy enough to roll our sick patient into public view and force us all to look at it in the first place.

Largely due to Darnell's efforts, the Chamber's got a new mantra: "We want our business community to be the most inclusive in the country," says Bob Morgan, Chamber president.

Now, it'll be up to Rodgers to turn talk into reality - to leverage the weight behind the issue and create a business culture in Charlotte where owners of small businesses, regardless of color or gender, get the access and support they need to survive and even thrive.

It's true that, at the Chamber's helm, she'll have a lot more to worry about than racial inclusion. The biggest, of course, is job creation: While the Chamber boasts attracting more than \$650 million and 4,400 new jobs into the Charlotte area this year, local unemployment hovers in double digits.

Yet it's also true that Rodgers takes the reins at arguably the most socially polarized moment in our

recent history - as debates over public schools grow nastier, as talk of economic inclusion for minority business owners hits a stronger pitch.

Rodgers' biography suits the task: an Army brat who spent a nomadic youth in Europe, she brings a worldly, outsider's sensibility to complex social debates. As a top executive in the male-dominated construction industry, she intuitively grasps the struggle of navigating toward access, opportunity and power.

How she leads on issues of race and diversity through this tempest will affect our city for years to come.

"Because of the Chamber's history of being disconnected from the urban community, they are now trying to be proactive," says Damian Johnson, president of the minority advocacy group, the Urban Business Network. "But I think the Chamber is still quite slow in moving towards solutions. It's like they need everybody to sign off on doing what they already know is right. If they think we're going to let up and disappear, we're not."

As Rodgers stood on stage on Tuesday evening before an expectant crowd of 1,800 at the NASCAR Hall of Fame, she did not indicate that diversity would be a signature issue. But she said afterward that it is a priority.

"I think it will take a lot of intentional effort to understand people from another perspective and gaining some ground in terms of trust," she said. "There was a study several years ago on social capital in which Charlotte ranked pretty low in interracial trust."

That's not likely to change as long as Charlotte's companies, large and small, stay in their cultural comfort zones to do business as usual. She has no specific agenda yet, but is behind a new Chamber initiative that matches large companies with minority suppliers.

"Diversity and inclusiveness in doing business depends on being willing to take some risks and develop new partnerships within the business community," Rodgers says. "I also feel that we all need to develop a little tougher skin and not see so many things in terms of ethnicity or gender. As long as we continue to focus on those things that divide us, we can't benefit from the things that make us alike."

Ultimately, though, Pat Rodgers is far more pragmatist than philosopher. In her view, economic inclusion is a necessity in building any healthy community.

"I think it's a moral question, an economic question, a strategic question," she says. "I mean, we need to build the tax base. And the only way we're going to do that is to broaden the tax base. And the only way you're going to do that is to create jobs."

Leaders need compassion

A Pat Rodgers story, circa 1955:

It's Easter morning and her mother is driving Pat and her sisters through a quiet French countryside en route to church. Her childhood, she says, was fairly simple: Dad, career Army, was always gone; Mom did everything.

"My mother was all dressed up that morning and she got a flat tire by a cow field," Rodgers tells me as we sit in her company's wood-paneled conference room. It's an early weekday morning and

Rodgers' schedule is packed with meetings, but at the moment she is nursing a hot cup of tea, reminiscing about that Easter morning.

"She made us all get out of the car, sit on the grass, and we watched her take off her white gloves, and take her hat off and put it on top of the car, jack up the car, and change the tire. She put her white gloves back on her greasy hands, and put us back in the car and off we went to church."

Pat Rodgers pauses. "My mother was an amazing woman," she says. "There wasn't anything she couldn't do."

When Rodgers talks, the subtext is usually fortitude and moral character, the transformative power of hard work. In Charlotte, her personal narrative is that soft-spoken, hard-hatted lady boss who year after year beats the boys at their own game and then, off-hours, volunteers.

"I watched my mother struggle to fit into a culture in Europe that was not her own," Rodgers says. "Being the new kid in so many new schools and being self-conscious of being very tall for a girl, I think I do understand what it's like to be outside the mainstream."

Rodgers says: "To be a good leader you've got to be compassionate. In a lot of businesses, that's not particularly viewed as strong attribute. But I don't think you can be a successful leader if you're not compassionate."

Born in Columbia, Rodgers returned from her early days in Europe to live with her grandmother in St. Louis and graduate high school, then got married to an aerospace worker. By the early 1970s, not yet 25, she was already divorced with two children, and looking for work.

She found a temp job as a receptionist at Rodgers Construction, and would eventually fall in love with B.D. Rodgers, owner of the company.

In 1988, B.D. turned over the CEO reins to her, while he remains chairman of the company. Under her leadership, the company has grown from \$30million to nearly \$400 million in annual revenues. "This city has enjoyed a lot of prosperity, and we've ridden a lot of coattails," she says.

Her views on economic inclusion grow out of her early experiences traveling to various Rodgers work sites in distressed areas across Charlotte.

"I would go to these projects and drive through those neighborhoods and think, 'Golly, there's got to be a better way - a better way to get people affordable housing, a better way for these children to live.'"

She says her views also are shaped by growing up as an outsider in foreign countries often dependent on the kindness of strangers, and by the hours alone she spent reading the biographies of great leaders such as Winston Churchill, Florence Nightingale and Booker T. Washington.

On her office wall is a plaque with this Abraham Lincoln quote: "Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle."

Business partnership

What speaks volumes about Rodgers is her growing relationship with Walter Davis, who is among the city's few black contractors.

Davis, 47, had never met Rodgers personally, but in the spring of 2007 he contacted her and asked to join her team to work on the Wells Fargo Cultural Campus, where Rodgers Builders, as the general contractor, was calling the shots.

Not only did she hire Davis to work on the cultural campus, but she has partnered with him on nearly a dozen other projects, from hospital expansions to new buildings on college campuses.

"Larger businesses have the capacity and the resources to mentor smaller businesses," Rodgers says. "If our mentoring another firm increases the quality and capacity of workmanship in our industry and community, we all benefit."

The Chamber, which has reached out to Milwaukee for a successful inclusion model, could do well by duplicating the burgeoning partnership between Rodgers Builders and the scrappy Walter B. Davis Co.

"They embraced a much smaller company, and they didn't have to," says Davis, whose firm generated less than \$20 million in revenue last year. "They've opened up whole new markets for us that in the future will become a larger proportion of our revenue."

Pat Rodgers also is quietly helping Davis expand his professional network.

"If you want a seat at the table," she says, "you have to come to the table."

Rodgers, a former chair of the Carolina Association of General Contractors, the industry's most powerful trade group, encouraged Davis to become more active in the CAGC. He became a board member.

"I think it's really important for everyone to maintain their autonomy and identity," Rodgers says. "But Walter is a very senior person for us. He's very conservative, he calculates risk. He reminds me of the kind of business we are."

It'll take more than that to impress Johnson of the Urban Business Network.

"If Pat Rodgers can connect to Walter Davis, those connections have to trickle down to the masses," he says. "There's always a token or a pacifier given, but it doesn't trickle down to us. We've reached a point where getting 'just enough' is no longer enough."

In the end, Rodgers agrees that Davis needs to always be reaching back and offering opportunities to businesses smaller than his own.

"We all need to be asking that question: What are you doing to help others along? People who know how this really works will be asking that question into infinity - what are you doing?"

As David Darnell told me: "You can always expect Pat Rodgers to listen for a while, but then she's going to ask the tough provocative question that raises everybody's thinking to a higher level."

I believe we're ready for that, to elevate our thinking in a bleak economy that seems to be bringing out the worst in all of us.

"Sometimes, I feel like we are not asking that enough across our community," Rodgers says. "We are always looking at the big banks, or at Duke. But this community is full of small and middle-sized businesses. We should be asking them, too, and each other, 'What are you doing?'"

"It doesn't matter what color, or gender or size company you are. We should all be challenging each other to be better."

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