HARTFORD COURANT - OP-ED

The Story Has Yet To Be Written About Blacks in Corporations

■ Your recent series, which included interviews with four successful black executives, made for interesting reading. I have little doubt that the individuals merited the extensive attention.

But I am troubled by what those acticles did not say. They personalized the issue of minority employment so much that, by implication, they can only be judged to be a cumulative distortion of the facts.

One executive was quoted as saying: "Everybody is doing all right at entry and low levels. The real question is officers."

The problem of minority underemployment and unemployment exists at every level, to be sure, but most glaringly at entry-level positions, which require increasingly sophisticated education. The great majority of minority youth and young adults are constantly being denied that educational opportunity by default, if not by conscious intention.

Data Resources Inc., a Lexington, Mass.-based economic forecasting firm, recently projected a bright economic future for New England, a prediction based on a number of quantitative indicators. Our region, according to DRI, will be moving into the No. 2 spot in economic growth in the nation, from 1985 to 1991.

But, in this context, a qualitative indicator seems to be most decisive. "The most important factor for New England is its percentage of college graduates in the population," said a DRI economist. This apparently will be the key element in the area's bright economic future, in the view of several analysts.

How are our minority youth and young adults, and the children of the poor generally, going to obtain the sophisticated training they will need to be a part of this new wave of prosperity?

Does this bright future presuppose the existence of a large, permanent underclass, who will have to live at a subsistence level, with poor housing, dysfunctional educational experiences, inadequate food and health care and little hope?

New England now generally has a relatively low unemployment rate. But urban centers, such as Hartford, have shockingly high unemployment rates, especially among minority youth and young adults.

They will tell you that they need the training. They know. They have tried. They have applied.

But they have seen the handwriting on the wall, again and again. It tells them that extensive education and job training are required, to which most have little or no access, no matter how hard they may try to find their own way.

Last summer, the Asylum Hill Organizing Project sponsored a jobs program for 21 minority youth. It was well-conceived, expertly directed and generously funded by some local corporations.

But, sadly, it was a drop in the bucket. We were not able to do any substantive training in high-tech skills during two summer months, on a relatively low budget. Not did we begin to make an impact on the lives of the hundreds of poor youth and young adults who also live in our neighborhood.

To do that, we would have needed massive resources, financial and technical, which were not then, nor are they now, at our disposal. Yet, given the cutback in most federal job-training programs, where could we — where can we — turn to find those resources?

Some federal programs do remain. Aetna Life & Casualty, for example, has received an Urban Development Action Grant for $3 million over 10 years to do job training for minorities. But it remains to be seen whether that program will do more than allow the company to recruit from the upper crust of the minority communities around the country, from among the graduates of the Howard Universities of this world, and thereby leave untouched the great majority of the economically and educationally disadvantaged who suffer from the results of much benign neglect in neighborhoods such as Asylum Hill.

Will the corporations which hired those four executives, in your articles, and which probably will keep promoting them, also be willing to take concrete steps, as the leadership in Washington is expecting the private sector to do, to invest substantial capital in job-training programs for the poor? That is the question which your four interviews treated with such eloquent silence.

I realize human interest stories can say just so much. But I have a suggestion:

I, or any other pastor who serves an urban congregation, could readily supply you with the names of four men and women who have been seeking work for extensive periods and who have constantly been turned down. They have gone back again and again, knowing that in all likelihood they would continue to be rejected, for want of proper skills or "experience."

In the meantime, they have held their own lives together, many have supported families, and they have continued, somehow, to have some hope for their future and for their children's futures. They are the unspoken heroes. They are the men and women of ability, fortitude, dedication and energy, whose stories truly need to be told.

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