

# Why Does Diversity Matter?

*by Alison Storm | photo courtesy of the Riley Institute*

**B**ack when Main Street was a desolate four-lane road and Haywood Mall was just an architect's sketch, Calder Ehrmann moved to town. The Midwesterner arrived back in the 1970s to a much different Greenville than the city that exists today. Shortly after moving to town Ehrmann stopped in a small convenience store on South Pleasantburg Drive to pick up some bread and milk. "I looked up and there was a big chair bolted to the wall," he remembers. "I said, 'Excuse me. Can you tell me what that chair is up on the wall?' [The clerk] looked at me for the longest time. She said, there is usually a guy with a shot gun there to make sure you pay." Thankfully, Ehrmann says, Greenville's climate is much different today, more than three decades later, but he still believes there is still a long road ahead when it comes to race and gender issues.

Ehrmann spent 47 years in manufacturing, making cars, cans, trucks, and tires. But these days his focus is helping others learn how to manage their differences. Now retired, he spends most of his time and energy as a Senior Associate with the Riley Institute at Furman University. Ehrmann helped establish the Upstate Diversity Leadership Academy, a development program teaching diversity management skills to area leaders. He says the program

has been so successful soon Columbia will have its own Diversity Leadership Academy. "The facts are that South Carolina has a legacy of race and gender issues in particular that are extremely difficult," he says. "The spotlight gets put on South Carolina because of that and that's unfortunate."

The Diversity Leadership Academy came to the Upstate back in 2002 when tensions soared surrounding the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Ehrmann remembers a difficult situation in the business community and the academy was created to manage those tensions. "Not only was the course well-received, but it was obvious that it was very affective for providing a model for leaders in the community of being able to manage diversity and manage differences," he says. The goal of the program is to help leaders learn how to handle a diverse environment while making South Carolina more competitive with other states as well as internationally. "Many people talk about this business of having representations of different demographic groups. Do we have enough women? Do we have enough minorities?



Calder Ehrmann

"The facts are that South Carolina has a legacy of race and gender issues in particular that are extremely difficult."

But the question is if you have all of those, how do you manage the differences folks bring to the table?" he asks. "To have them at the table is one thing. To engage them is another."

Rocky Watts knows what it's like to engage a varied group of people. The two dozen men and women he employs at SR&I, LLC represent different races and backgrounds. "If anyone knows anything about diversity, certainly we do," he says. As a minority business

owner he sees the importance of diversity from the inside and outside. "I think on a whole everyone has the idea that they'd like to have diversity in not only employment but in their suppliers," he says. "I think it benefits everybody." Watts started his employment screening company nearly a decade ago and is constantly looking for new resources to help him grow. He recently joined the Carolina Minorities Supplier Development Council as well as the Greenville Chamber, hoping to find new ways to get his product in front of the right people. But as a general rule, Watts says, he doesn't focus on the fact that he operates a minority-owned business. "I go out and sell what I can," he says. "Hopefully I can offer a product at a good price."

But as corporations seek out diversity, the Greenville Chamber hopes to serve as a connection point for minority-owned businesses like Watts' and the companies looking

to hire. President and CEO Ben Haskew says an example is when CU-ICAR recently came to the Chamber wanting to hold a workshop with minority-owned businesses. The Chamber promoted the event, but realized they had

no comprehensive directory of minority-owned businesses. "If we had that inventory more available, we would have a go-to list immediately available for anyone who wants to reach out to minority-owned businesses," he says. So now, the Chamber is working to compile that list. Haskew says diversity is also becoming more of a focus within the Chamber itself. The Chamber is currently working to seat Leadership Greenville's class XXXIV. In the last class, just four out of 51 graduates were minorities. Haskew says this time around, the Chamber made a real effort to encourage more minority candidates to apply. He says out of 86 applicants, 16 are minorities. "We think that's a very good step in the right direction to try to get more candidates in this class." Haskew says he is aware of complaints that the Chamber is not as diverse as it should be and he says they are responding to those concerns and suggestions. "Our attitude is we want to

be an open and inclusive organization," he says.

To see how far Greenville has come in terms of inclusion, Ehrmann says, compare photos of past city councils with a current snapshot. "There's one white male on city council. The rest of the members are all female," he says of today's leaders. "If you go back and look at city council when I showed up here, you will not see that same picture. That's an example of the progress that's being made." Diversity is no longer just a black and white issue, Ehrmann says. According to the International Center of the Upstate, people from more than 70 countries are represented in the Upstate and as international business continues to grow, Ehrmann says diversity

"We need to sit down  
all of us, long, tall,  
short, wide, whatever  
and say here's what  
I think and why."

takes on a new look. "We need to sit down all of us, long, tall, short, wide, whatever – and say, here's what I think and why," he says. "It's going to take a continuous, organized effort to move us out of yesterday and into tomorrow, and that's what we're all about." **E**