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**BRIGHT IDEAS
FOR A SLOW ECONOMY**

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JWBC launches new involvement initiative

JWBC focuses on minority outreach through Women of Color Initiative

Two Jacksonville Women's Business Center (JWBC) board members are spearheading an effort to ensure the JWBC, a program of the Jacksonville Chamber Foundation, effectively serves Northeast Florida's women business owners from various races, ethnicities and cultures.

Pegine Echevarria, president of Team Pegine, and Tanya Stewart, president of the Smith Stewart Solutions Group, kicked off the JWBC's Women of Color Initiative in February to increase the participation of minority women business owners in center programming. Statistics show 58 percent of JWBC clients at introductory sessions are minority women entrepreneurs, but that percentage significantly decreases for participants in the JWBC's signature mentoring programs.

"In my Hispanic culture, it's ingrained in individuals not to ask for help on business matters, share financial information or talk about what's going on behind the scenes at your company," Echevarria said. "And from the time you are little, you're trained not to brag about your success. It's just not in the culture."

To maximize business potential, however, mentoring, counseling – and even self-promotion – are critical tools for a company's success. And a strong small business community is fundamental to the prosperity of Northeast Florida, serving as the backbone of the region.

"Tanya and I have been very involved with the JWBC and know how much value was added to our businesses by participating in JWBC mentoring programs," Echevarria said. "At the same time, we've seen some of our region's minority women business owners struggle, and though we personally informed them of the JWBC's programs and services, many attended an orientation and stopped there. We have this incredible resource in the JWBC, and we need to determine what the cultural barriers are. Why aren't all of the people who might benefit showing up?"

"We thought there was a disconnect among minority women business owners," Stewart agreed. "More minority businesses are reaching economic levels they haven't historically achieved. Pegine and I both knew

businesses doing well but not utilizing the programs and services offered by the JWBC. We're curious to know what is keeping them away. Our purpose with this initiative is to identify where the disconnect is taking place, and what we can do to resolve it."

After several conversations, Echevarria and Stewart began thinking strategically about what the JWBC could do to better attract minority women business owners to its programming – not only as participants, but also as volunteers and sponsors. Those discussions led to the formation of the Women of Color Initiative, which features a diverse group of eight women business owners, and may include several more as the year progresses. Stewart and Echevarria co-chair the 2008 Women of Color committee, and Agnes Lopez, owner of Agnes Lopez Photography, was recently named the third co-chair.

Currently the group is in the beginning stages of determining how to tackle the issue, and both Echevarria and Stewart emphasize that research is essential in the process. The committee is planning candid discussions and intimate focus group sessions with minority women business owners who used JWBC programs and services as well as those who decided not to pursue assistance from the JWBC.

"We will be aggressive in our research and call on volunteers from diverse spans of the spectrum so we can understand the cultural differences in our community, and how we can best reflect the region we serve," Stewart said. "These conversations and our research will truly open a lot of opportunity for unity within the city. If we can get all of the city's women business owners to understand the importance of counseling, mentoring and networking with fellow business owners, it's going to enhance their businesses more rapidly than if they're trying to do it alone."

Plans are underway to hold a "Northeast Florida Women of Color Entrepreneurial Conference" on March 9, 2009 – International Women's Day. For more information about the Women of Color Initiative, contact Pegine Echevarria at pegine@pegine.com, Agnes Lopez at agnes@agneslopez.com or Tanya Stewart at tanya@smithstewartgroup.com.