

Friday, October 9, 2009

Nexus Alliance focuses on public service, youth and image-building

Boston Business Journal - by [Mary Moore](#)



Nexus members from left: Stephen Howard, Eric Grant, Roger Hypolite, Dan Rivers and Javin Jones. [View Larger](#)

Tired of negative perceptions that have dogged black men — that they do not give back to their communities, that they are not responsible, that they are not capable leaders — a group of African American professionals in Boston has formed to mold a much different image.

They call themselves the **Nexus Alliance** and, in the last 18 months, they have built a database of 400 members joined in an effort to make a positive impact both in Boston's black communities and in the city's professional circles.

Their mission is broad and yet incredibly simple: Mentor young black men. Inspire them to believe they can do more and stand behind them as they do it. Pave career pathways. Provide leadership in the black community. And shine a light on black men in the business world, a light bright enough to ensure they are no longer overlooked for advancement.

This is not the first time a group has come together in Boston to tackle longstanding criticisms related to race and inclusiveness. Indeed, the Nexus Alliance formed around the same time as the launch of Commonwealth Compact, an initiative of the McCormack Graduate School of Policy Studies at **University of Massachusetts Boston**, which aims to increase diversity in the state's workforce. And The Partnership is well-known in Boston for the leadership development, training and career paths it provides professionals of color.

But what makes the Nexus Alliance different, according to those involved, is that this is a group of black men who, in a very deliberate way, are taking responsibility for their own progress and the progress of those coming behind them.

The group did not galvanize by, as president Dan Rivers described it, “getting everyone lathered up” and then creating an organization to harness the agitated energy. Instead, the Nexus Alliance, led by a group of black businessmen, came up with the organization’s vision, put a corporate-type structure in place and then began building programs after that.

“The majority of the group is like-minded — positive people coming together,” said Rivers, a financial adviser at Morgan Stanley Smith Barney. “We’ve done a good job of trying to build consensus in a way that will create an empowerment zone for black men that will have positive residual impact in the community.”

Rivers, himself, is different, a virtual newcomer to visible black leadership in Boston. And that may, in fact, have helped.

“He was a new fresh face. For me that’s refreshing, and it allows him to do things,” said Joseph Feaster, an attorney with **McKenzie & Associates** and former president of the Boston branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and one of the founding members of the Nexus Alliance. “If someone else had stepped to the fore, people might ask, ‘What’s that person’s agenda?’ If I was the one, people would say, ‘What’s Joe Feaster up to?’ ”

Members of the Nexus Alliance have organized community events — a 600-person mother’s day dinner at the **Blue Hill Boys & Girls Club** in Dorchester, for example, with Nexus Alliance members working as waiters and serving meals. The organization also is partnering with Mass Mentoring Partnership to develop a mentoring program.

And it has hosted college and career events with **Massachusetts Bay Community College** and **Bentley College**, counseling younger black men on the importance of continuing education and fostering their career ambitions.

“They are impressed to see men who look like them wearing suits and ties and in important positions,” said Sam Martin, senior vice president and chief advertising officer for the **Boston Globe** and second vice president of the Nexus Alliance.

Deliberate, careful and strategic as they may be, Nexus Alliance leaders have a clear and determined agenda, though keenly aware of the fine lines they walk in trying to make vision reality. In the black community, for example, their challenge is to gain the trust of those young black men.

“In a suit, they think I’m a sell-out,” said Rivers. “This is about shaping the image of success for black youth. When you see me walking down the street in my suit versus walking down the street in my jeans — it’s the same guy. We all put on our pants the same way. We want to show them that not only the clergy wear suits.”

In Boston’s business community, they face an even bigger hurdle — easing into deeply etched, largely white male, professional networks.

“We have young folks who are well-trained, committed to the community and capable,” Feaster said. “I want some of these folks to rise up to become captains of industry. I’d like to see them become the CEOs of some of these institutions. Become major investors. Head up nonprofits and hospitals. Sit on corporate boards of directors.”

Feaster, for one, points to a Commonwealth Compact study that found a dearth of black men serving on corporate boards. Then again Feaster, who cites a long list of professional accomplishments and has never been invited to join a corporate board, did not need a study to tell him those invitations are lacking.

“It’s not happening. I don’t know why. Maybe they don’t know the pathways. Maybe we can help in getting them there,” said Feaster. “I think in Boston it has to do with the fact that there are networks that aren’t all connected with each other,” said Bob Turner, co-director of the Commonwealth Compact. “I think parts of Boston are very welcoming and civic-minded and inclusive, and some haven’t gotten out of the old ways.”

And those old ways — of thinking and of being — are exactly what the Nexus Alliance is all about changing.

“Our whole thought process is this — one guy can throw a rock, two guys can throw a boulder,” said Rivers. “And a group can move a mountain.”