

My Hospitality Journey...

By Lanée Burns

I have been in the hospitality industry for 22 years. I began my career in 1998, at one of the top purchasing firms in the industry, Higgins Purchasing Group, with THE Steve Higgins. I graduated from Sonoma State with a BA in African American Studies. So, becoming a purchasing agent was not in my career path. When I started working at Higgins, I was 1 of 3 African Americans at the time in our San Francisco office. I did not know anything about the hospitality industry. I was introduced to this firm by Chris Clingshoff, the African American male that worked at Higgins, who saw me at the Temp Agency in their building. When I interviewed, Nicole Garratt, the African American female, came into my interview and was excited to see me. Maybe she was excited to see another black face, but it was very welcoming.

As I continued my journey at Higgins in San Francisco, California, I thought this industry was very interesting and everyone was nice and friendly. I did notice that I never saw any African American sales rep come to our office, so I always wondered in the back of my mind, are we the only Black people in this industry and at this firm (laughing)? As I attended trade shows and traveled, I continued to notice the lack of Blacks in this industry. It has always been a question in my mind, where are the Black people? and why do I rarely see them at shows, in magazines, or on panels? That question still sticks in my mind to this day.

I left Higgins Purchasing in 2002 and moved to Los Angeles, California. I worked with a manufacturing company, went back into purchasing and finally landed in sales in 2003. I became a Multi-Line Sales Consultant in 2005, which I launched Lanee S. Burns & Associates, LLC.

I will tell you, when I first came into sales in 2003, a white male sales consultant told me that I would not make it as a sales consultant in this industry. My first thought was WTF did he just say to me? but my verbal response was, *“really?”* He continued explaining to me, I was not married and I was a single mom, blah blah blah. As I was standing in front of him with my signature half smile, I was thinking, *really am I hearing him correctly?* After that conversation, I called a few of my white female sales consultant and asked did they ever get *“warned”* about becoming a sales consultant due to them being a mom or not married? They indicated to me no, no one never told them that or placed doubt on their success. I have always wondered for years, did he tell me this out of concern, not sure what the concern would be. Did he tell me this because he was scared of a little sales competition, or did he tell me this because he did not believe this black girl could make it and be successful in this industry. I always like to believe that race does not play a part in business, but it makes a person wonder when you are told things like that.

Many companies that I represent, I am the only Black sales rep for their company. Sometimes I am the only Black for their entire company. That has never bother me so much. Growing up in Los Angeles and attending predominately white schools and attending Sonoma State where we had less than 5% blacks in the entire college, I was always aware that there will be many times, I will be the only Black person in the room. So, working with these companies never bothered me as long as the owners, the sales manager and my sales team treated me fair, professional and with respect. I must say, all the companies that I have worked for has treated me with all of that and more.

As a Sales Consultant, many times in the beginning of my career, as I entered offices to do presentation, I would get that look like oh you're Lanee (as I am giggling on the inside), like yes, I am, like they were expecting someone else. I have sat in many offices with top executives, where I have been dismissed, looked at like I do not belong in the room, challenged on my knowledge of my product or just simply not respected for my years in this industry. I have had people purposely mispronounce my name because they said it sounds better a different way. I was even told by a sales manager that I was being too sensitive and I was taking things the wrong way. I explained to him how sometimes, it is uncomfortable to be the only Black person in a room or at a company dinner, because it feels like all eyes are on you. He

still did not understand what I was telling to him. So, one day when he came to Los Angeles, I took him to Roscoe's for lunch. Roscoe's is a historically black restaurant that is known for their chicken and waffles. It is a staple in the Los Angeles area. That particular day for some reason, he was the only white person in this restaurant. At that moment, he understood what I was saying and how I felt because he informed me that he felt uncomfortable and as if everyone was watching him. As I ate my chicken and waffles, I just giggled on the inside. He got it and after that day he started to understand how I felt sometimes in this industry and noticed some of the treatment I would receive when we were at meetings.

When someone says they have never seen or experience racism, they just do not understand all of this. I respond, *that is fine*, I am glad that you have not had that experience. Please understand, because you have not experienced it does not mean that it does not exist. You never see calories but you know that they exist, so some become mindful of what they eat. Everyone might not experience racism or situations that have made them uncomfortable in life, but that does not mean it does not exist in the world. I hope I never hear a story of a Black sales consultant being told that they will not make it in this industry, because of...

My role in the hospitality industry is to continue to recruit, mentor and help others. I try to intentionally, reach out to the Blacks in the industry so, they can see and understand that they do not have to be the only one in the room. Just how Chris, informed me of the job at Higgins, it is my job to inform others of these great opportunities in this industry, specifically Black, talented, professional people. It is my role to educate my associates on things that they might not know or understand. At the end of the day, we are all the same.

I always welcome dialogue on race. I have learned over the years, if people honestly do not know, who will inform them? The same excitement I have when I educate my friends on the hospitality industry is the same excitement I have when I educate a non-person of color on race. It is important that we teach each other. I do not want to be the spokesperson for the entire Black community but I love to engage in healthy conversation where we can learn from each other. I notice, when people are able to openly talk everyone gets comfortable, and when you are comfortable you build beautiful relationships and partnerships.

I think NEWH can empower the industry by speaking up and expanding the conversation. It is important for NEWH to be at the forefront of this and to encourage conversations within the hospitality community. It is important that NEWH highlight those companies and individuals that have great diversity programs each month in their magazine on the Corporate level and the Chapter level. I believe that NEWH sponsors, have a duty to support diversity, equality and inclusion as they continue to support NEWH.

Regardless of the few interesting experiences that I have had in my 22 years in this industry. I cannot imagine myself not being in this industry. I have met some of the most beautiful people that have always allowed me to be me and supported me. Being a seasoned sales consultant, it has taught me to make sure that I have a voice and as the late John Lewis has said, *"Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Do not become hostile. Be hopeful, be optimistic, never ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble. We will find a way to make a way out of no way."*

I know I am **GOOD TROUBLE** for this industry and my experience has been overall good with a few bumps. I look forward to making sure that the hospitality industry continues to build diversity, equality and inclusion. As I walk the halls of trade shows, continue to give presentations to firms and continue to be a positive role model in this industry, I would like my Black associates to know that you will always see a smile from me and know that you are never in a room by yourself. Good Trouble, Necessary Trouble is always by your side and making sure that our voice is heard.