

DREAM FUND

Program promotes equal opportunity

Wednesday, January 18, 2006

On Martin Luther King Day, speakers across the country pointed out the obstacles that must be overcome before the civil rights leader's great dream of equality is fully realized.

The movement King led through the force of his courage and eloquence swept away the legal barriers of segregation and opened a new world of opportunity for blacks. A variety of economic indicators show that millions of African-Americans are taking advantage of the opportunities created by the pioneers of the civil rights movement.

Despite these successes, a distressingly large number of African-Americans remain on the margins of society, mired in poverty and hampered by the social disorders that afflict the nation's inner cities.

Double-digit unemployment rates are common in predominantly black urban areas. In Paducah, for instance, the unemployment rate for blacks is almost three times higher than the overall jobless rate. Martin Luther King's dream gives little inspiration to a man or woman without a job and without any real hope of finding meaningful employment.

Fred and Peggy Paxton looked at the state of the dream in Paducah and decided that the community needed to do more to make it a reality for all black residents. The Paxtons announced last week that they were establishing a \$1 million endowment to help African-Americans enter the local workforce and gain the benefits of full participation in the economy.

In the interests of disclosure, we will note here that Fred Paxton is chairman of the board of Paxton Media Group, the owner of this newspaper and WPSD-TV.

The endowment, which will be managed by the Community Foundation of West Kentucky, has a dual purpose: to help blacks obtain the education and skills they need to succeed in the job market, and to raise awareness among employers of the availability of qualified black job applicants.

“The premise that I’m operating on here is that a good job will solve almost any problem that a person or family has,” Paxton said.

Local black leaders, including Paducah-McCracken County NAACP President J.W. Cleary, provided the framework for the Paxtons’ employment initiative. Cleary will help to run the nonprofit corporation that will operate the programs funded by the endowment. With assistance from business leaders and education officials, the corporation will provide a broad array of services to job seekers.

City and county officials and the Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce have pledged their full support for this promising, privately-funded venture. Local leaders hope to raise at least \$1 million more in donations from individuals, businesses and organizations to build the endowment and expand its reach in the community.

A hope is that the McCracken County Community Career Endowment will turn into a model for private sector activism in dealing with the racial inequalities that persist in cities throughout the nation.