

Q & A

Tackling Accounting's Long Racial Division

Johnson Seeks to Create Role Models



Gregory Johnson takes over as executive director of the National Association of Black Accountants.

Gregory Johnson, 44, was an undergraduate at Adelphi University studying business when he decided to take an accounting class. That course led him to a summer internship at PricewaterhouseCoopers, which led to a full-time job offer after college. His passion for the field drew him to the industry's main trade group, the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, where he worked for 16 years overseeing diversity programs. Today, he is taking over as executive director of the National Association of Black Accountants, a membership and advocacy organization based in Greenbelt. The Post's Anita Huslin asked him about his plans.

Q: How did you choose accounting as your profession?

A: I basically stumbled into it. My background was one in which I didn't have family members who graduated from college. I did not have family members who were professional businesspersons. When I went to college, I just knew I wanted to be a businessman because I wanted to wear a suit and work in an office. One of my counselors in college said he was in business, too, but he was going to make more money than me because he was going to be an accountant. That one tiny interaction with one person changed my life, literally.

What are your goals at NABA?

When you look at the number of African American CPAs in the country, by one estimate there are approximately 6,000. That's about 1 percent of all CPAs. That tells you mentors and role models are probably not there. How many moms have suggested to their kids, become a doctor, become a lawyer? Our motto is "lifting as we climb." We need to work on awareness, what the

profession is about, and through that create opportunity for this generation.

What makes accounting such a great career?

One of the silver linings to Sarbanes-Oxley, Arthur Andersen, Enron, is that the world is paying more attention, and there's more recognition of the important role that accountants and CPAs play in the business world.

NABA has programs like residency programs, on-site college living experiences to help students understand what college is going to be like and what careers in accounting can be like. There's been expansion in the field . . . from tax professionals to consultants, fraud auditors, forensics accountants, certified internal auditors and certified fraud examiners are now becoming bigger within the overall realm of business.

One of the things we did when I was with the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, we contacted minority CPAs and learned that some worked with sports stars like John Elway, Barry Sanders, Robert Horry. They agreed to appear in print ads where they basically said, "This is my CPA, and this is who has helped make me successful." State CPA societies picked up on it and did ads with Venus and Serena Williams, Adriane Bracy [a CPA and vice president of finance for the St. Louis Rams]. I'd like to see us have programs to ensure our members and future members would have ways to participate proportionately in the opportunities our profession offers.

Have you started your taxes yet?

No. Well, actually, I've gotten about 10 percent through. That's not one of my favorite disciplines. So, it just takes me a little bit longer because it's one of those things I'm not that good at and have to focus on to get done. It's a little like eating Brussels sprouts.

How to you spend your free time?

For now, my family is still back in New Jersey, so I travel home on weekends to spend time with my lovely wife and two kids. I have a daughter who is 12 and a son who is 17. While I'm here, I try to get to this 24-hour gym in Bowie and do cardio kickboxing on a regular basis. When I am home, I get up and do that on Sunday mornings, too. It's good for the body, good for the mind.