

# The Washington, DC Women's Business Center

## *An Overdue Resource*

BY AMANDA ABRAMS

It's just a small office that looks out over New York Avenue and employs a staff, currently, of two. But the Washington, DC Women's Business Center, it turns out, fills a much needed niche.

"Our capacity has a sprained ankle from running so fast," laughed Samira Cook, the center's director. Established this March, the organization is already 80 percent on its way to meeting its goal of helping 250 area women in 2010.

It's not a new concept: the group is part of a network of 110 women's business centers located around the country, all backed by the federal Small Business Administration and non-profit organizations (in this case, the National Community Reinvestment Coalition). But for the Washington region's women, it's an overdue resource: a place where the special needs of entrepreneurs who might also be mothers and caregivers are closely considered. As Cook is fond of saying, the organization works with "the whole woman."

Example: A woman recently came in to talk with Cook about expanding the cleaning service she owns. The main hurdle? She didn't have evening daycare for her children. So she and Cook brainstormed about alternatives. "We talk about feasibility – does it make sense for your family?" said Cook. "It's something men don't always have experience with."

That woman-centered one-on-one counseling – about anything, including family issues or personal obstacles – is one of the key services provided by the center, and it's free. "We serve women who are socially or economically disadvantaged – that's part of our mission," said Cook.

The center has other programs, too, some of which have a nominal cost. There's the business plan lab, a seven-week workshop pairing women and their in-progress business plans with con-



Samira Cook in her office at the Women's Business Center. Photo: Amanda Abrams

sultants who guide them past the sticky patches. The center also offers a three-part financial fitness series that walks participants through the details of creating and managing budgets – both personal and business – and then seeking a line of credit with a bank.

Then there are offshoot events like Cook's little brainchild, the "Women's Business Walk and Talk." Rather than establishing a networking happy hour, where folks might be itching to get home to their families or stressing over the extra calories or cost of a glass of wine, she created a monthly morning walk: entrepreneurs can get some exercise while chatting and, conveniently, are invited to bring kids and pets along.

"I thought about my own family," said Cook, explaining where she got the concept. "If we're stressed, my mom will say, 'Let's go for a walk.' It's someplace where we can share, not just network."

The center helps a wide variety of businesses – from those with budgets of around \$20,000 to some in the million-plus range, and from decades-old companies with dozens of employees to brand new startups with one staff member.

One of those is Right at Home DC, a home care agency employing 50-100 staff members who help elderly and disabled adults with housekeeping and meals. Melanie Lamar, a District resident who's co-owned the business since 2005, was looking for some help with the home care agency licensing process, as well as advice about growing her business. She heard about the center through a newsletter sent by DC Councilmember Kwame Brown (At-Large) and wound up meeting with Cook in a one-on-one session.

"It was absolutely helpful," said Lamar. "Samira comes up with ideas right off the top of her head and follows through with those suggestions. And she attended a meeting along with me at the Department of Health."

Lamar's company is still working through the licensing process, "but if it hadn't been for [Cook], we probably wouldn't be as far along as we are right now."

In the hopes of helping more women like Lamar, the center is currently hiring a counselor who can take over some of Cook's responsibilities. That would free her up to figure out how the organization can expand its capacity if demand continues to rise. "Funding is an issue, of course," said Cook. So she's trying to establish partnerships with various for-profit groups – banks and others – so that some women can use the center's services completely for free. But until then, said Cook, "We're not turning anyone away."

The Washington, DC Women's Business Center is located at 64 New York Ave. NE. For more information, call 202-671-2144 or visit [www.dcwbc.org](http://www.dcwbc.org). ♦



Smithsonian  
Anacostia Community Museum



“Separate and Unequaled: Black Baseball in the District of Columbia”

This exhibition looks at the community phenomenon of baseball as played locally and professionally by African Americans in Washington, D.C. For general info call 202.633.4820; for required reservations call 202.633.4844.

Public Programs at the  
Anacostia Community Museum  
(reservations required)

**July 3** Imagining a Gullah World, **11 a.m.** Kelly Marie-Berry will lead families and others in creating song, dance, and story games in the Gullah tradition.

**July 10** Making Bling!, **10:30 a.m.** Create five styles of wire rings, with semi-precious stones led by jewelry designer Kathleen Manning of Bedazzled.

**July 11** Gullah Stories, **1 p.m.** Diane Gardner, also known as Um Attiya, will delight in sharing historical, imaginary, and family-inspired stories.

**July 13** Doll Making Workshop, **10:30 a.m.** Join doll artist Francine Haskins in the creation of an art doll. Fee Required.

**July 17** The Healing Arts, **11 a.m.** Join Ivy Hylton and learn how to handweave an indigo altar cloth or create a wearable healing art ritual amulet.

**July 18** Mixed-media Art Workshop, **1 p.m.** Following artist Kamala Subramanian, participants will produce their own small mixed-media works.

**July 24** Create a Gullah Collage, **11 a.m.** Artist Wanda Aikens will offer a collage workshop inspired by the Gullah experience.

**July 25** Objects of Beauty and Style, **1 p.m.** Come experience a discussion and demonstration on the jewelry inspired by African history and legend and the symbolism that they still carry today.

**July 27** The Fight for the Chesapeake Bay Watershed, **7 p.m.** Join Professor Howard Ernst and Chuck Fox in a lively discussion about the history and future of our Chesapeake Bay.

**July 31** Afro-Brazilian Dance Steps, **11 a.m.** Julia Jones, noted Washington, D.C., choreographer and dancer, will lead this workshop on Afro-Brazilian dance movements.

**Don't forget to hop on SHUTTLE ANACOSTIA**, a free shuttle offering roundtrip service from the Mall to the Anacostia Community Museum. Stops include the Ripley Center, the Air and Space Museum, the Anacostia Metro, and the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site. Take advantage fast; SHUTTLE ANACOSTIA stops running on Labor Day.

Get ready for our new exhibition, “Word, Shout Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner Connecting Communities through Language,” opening on August 9, 2010.

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