

August 1, 2012

TO: Black Engineer of the Year Award

From: Maurice Irvine
9521 Axehead Ct.
Randallstown, Md. 21133

RE: BEYA Community Service Nomination

It is with the utmost humility as well as one of the greatest accolades ever bestowed upon me to nominate Rhonda Thomas for recipient of the prestigious BEYA Award. Her enclosed curriculum vitae will highlight her excellent engineering managerial skills with DoD projects as well as being the first Black female engineer at the Naval Air Test Center. It will not however show, the constant War on Women, the proverbial glass ceiling and issues regarding race that she must confront, even today, yet remain focused on introducing minority, women and disadvantaged students into Math and Science careers.

After years of witnessing the constant erosion and attacks on affirmative action programs Rhonda decided to form an organization whereby the private sector would step in and provide the educational opportunities needed in the minority community. She, herself, being a graduate of the PAX-Tenn Navy co-op program. A program that selected minority and women high school students with a proven academic prowess, provided employment and also assisted with their tuition while attending Tennessee State University.

The name of the organization formed by Rhonda Thomas is called LEAP Forward Inc. (**L**aunching **E**ducational **A**ssistance **P**rograms Forward Inc.).

Our Website: leapforwardinc.org

The organization was conceived in 1998 and was granted tax exempt status in 2001. LEAP Forward Inc. is comprised of a Board of Directors, all of whom, hold engineering or technical degrees. The main goal of the organization is to introduce/help prepare minority, women and disadvantage students into STEM careers.

Upon forming this organization Rhonda noticed that the Calvert County school system was not offering courses that would properly prepare its students to compete in the ever changing world of technology. Calvert County being mainly a rural development area. Under Rhonda's personal commitment and relentless efforts, the Maryland MESA (Math, Engineering and Science Aptitude) program was adopted to the Calvert County school system as part of its PCI (Pre-College Initiative). It should be noted here that Rhonda turned down a professorship in engineering from Tennessee State University in order to pursue the development of this organization.

Another aspect of this organization is to provide scholarships and also to target exceptional students. This often involves going into the student's homes, filling out forms often going into the financial records of the parents and developing the trust that would allow the parents to give their consent that their child would break the long help blue collar work ethic that has been traditional for years.

LEAP Forward gets its funds principally via corporate contributions and personal donations. The funds generated feed directly into the short and long range objectives set forth by our founder Rhonda Thomas.

- *Scholarships. **LEAP Forward Inc.** culminates its year long fund raising efforts with its Scholarship Reception. Academic as well as book scholarships, as well as special recognition to those parents, corporations and community volunteers that have helped this grass roots organization meet its commitments to our students.
- * Provide annual college tours to traditional HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities). In November students were provided campus tours to Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, The School of Engineering at Tennessee State University as well as the campus of Vanderbilt University.
- * Annual participation at the Youth Technology Summit, this year the event was held at Bowie State University
- *Family Engineering Day at the National Building Museum
- *Annual participation in the National Society of Black Engineers Convention. (Rhonda is in the process of forming a local junior chapter of NSBE for the students and parents of Calvert County).
- *Ongoing efforts at sponsoring students into summer outreach engineering activities MITE (Minority Introduction To Engineering) programs.
- *Rhonda-despite her hectic schedule and her responsibilities to her engineering career volunteers as both a tutor and mentor with the Carroll Western United Methodist Church, whose phrase is, "Your Education Serves Ministry". The program is set up to provide homework assistance in the areas of Math and Science and also to provide mentorship to young women who may have questions about the complexities of life.
- * Upon student graduation Rhonda has set up a network with engineers and other professionals that will assist the graduate with resume writing, job placement and internships.
- * Collaborating with other community organizations to provide services and seek funding

Rhonda has a quiet unassuming demeanor that belies her tenacity and aggression at putting the goals of her organization into the accomplished status, for the students she has committed to serve. As a member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., Rhonda was given the line name of "Quiet Storm". Her sorority has acknowledged her commitment to excellence and the Annapolis graduate chapter has had Rhonda as its keynote speaker for three (3) years running during its scholarship tea.

Past BEYA awards have placed emphasis for its applicants, on leadership in the workforce as well as the community. The applicant was to have a proven track record as both role models and mentors. In addition the applicant must have shown a commitment to recruitment and the retention of minorities and women in technology fields.

With kind regards,

Maurice Irvine

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