After 50 years, OIC still relevant on work front

Robert C. Nelson

In response to City Controller Alan Butkovitz’s recent report of a 5.2 percent decrease in unemployment, it would seem that the local job outlook in our region is finally getting the economic boost needed for Philadelphians who are looking for work.

Additionally, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Philadelphia’s overall unemployment rate has decreased steadily and, at 6.8 percent, currently represents the city’s lowest unemployment rate since May 2008. Certainly this is good news for Philadelphia, but it is also encouraging for the many entities whose mission is to help drive workforce development and help individuals obtain the skills and training needed to secure employment in our region. One such organization is OIC.

Unbelievable as it may seem, this year marks the 50th anniversary of OIC — Opportunities Industrialization Centers, Inc., an organization founded on the principles of helping individuals by providing opportunities to better prepare them for a brighter future.

It was in 1964 that the late Rev. Dr. Leon Sullivan started OIC with a simple yet audacious mission: “Helping People Help Themselves,” and thereby advancing the idea that economic opportunity and advancement should be a birthright available to us all. It’s a mission that is as relevant now as it was at the height of the civil rights movement. Today, getting past those first few rungs of career advancement is still far too difficult for too many in our communities.

This is the task to which OIC has been dedicated for the last half-century. Our mission has always been about helping people from all communities and all neighborhoods climb the economic ladder. And throughout our long history, we’ve helped countless generations across the city do exactly this. Through innovative job training programs that feature classroom instruction as well as workplace situational environments to give students a “real-life” sense of the workplace, OIC has evolved to meet the needs of a changing workforce. From its early days of training for the manufacturing industry, to the growth of today’s hospitality and service industries, OIC continues to respond to the needs of Philadelphia’s workforce. While this hardly seems like an innovative idea, OIC, in its inception became a model for workplace training programs that exist today.

But for all the success we’ve had, the headwinds against which we struggle remain strong, such as an economy that marginalizes low-skilled workers; public policies that too often seek to punish the poor for being poor; and an education system burdened by decreasing resources as they seek to prepare our children for the future workforce.

It is within this environment that OIC continues its mission. Not just to honor the singular accomplishments of a great man, Rev. Leon Sullivan; not only to honor the rich legacy of what we have already accomplished as an organization, but also to honor our ongoing cause and those who continue to need our support to get a fair shot at an opportunity.

This anniversary year marks an organization-milestone for OIC. We know countless people who have been touched by our work whether through the far-reaching Sullivan Principles or our direct programs and services. Every day, we hear countless stories of people from all walks of life who are proud to share their OIC story, and proudly pronounce “I AM OIC.”

Our hope for OIC’s future is to continue to evolve along with the changing times so we may keep serving the needs of our citizens and to continue the legacy set by Reverend Leon H. Sullivan 50 years ago.

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