

# Black professionals networking via inaugural leadership course

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Kharyl Jackson, owner of marketing company Kjackz Consulting, wanted to learn leadership skills and help improve Denver's black community when she joined the Chamber Connect group late last year.

Six months into the [Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce's](#) program, she's treasuring a shared sense of excitement and perspective with her classmates, Jackson said.

The class has given her and her classmates access to high-level local and state elected officials, as well as metro-area business leaders. But what makes the course stand out from similar leadership courses at chambers of commerce is the chance to do it with others who share the experiences of the black community, she said.



*Kathleen Lavine | Business Journal*  
Richard Lewis and Angela Williams are co-chairs of Chamber Connect and serve on the board of the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce.

"It has been an opportunity to come together," Jackson said. "There's a passion in every voice, and that's what makes it."

The inaugural class began meeting in January. The 10-month course will finish in October after more classes, networking and a community service project forming a financial literacy program for school-age children and their parents through the nonprofit, Operation Hope.

The 30 professionals in the class -- half small-business entrepreneurs, half professionals in corporate jobs -- have met with state Legislature leaders and Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper, studied leadership tactics and started networking. Gov. Bill Ritter spoke to the group June 6.

Rich Lewis, CEO of [RTL Networks](#) and a board member with the black chamber, thought up the leadership program.

He attended the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Denver program in the past and found it valuable, he said.

Lewis sought to re-create the kind of leadership and connection-building he saw in that group, but gear it to helping black professionals find each other and resources that will keep them in Denver.

Denver's black community is small and geographically spread out. It's hard for a young black professional -- especially a transplant -- to find the resources within the black community, and many feel compelled to leave even if they're succeeding in the business world, Lewis said.

Lewis hopes the Chamber Connect program can catch the attention of young black professionals and get them plugged in before they get discouraged, he said.

"If you don't engage people when they have that energy, a couple things happen and they get frustrated and leave, or they stay and that fire goes out," he said.

The Chamber Connect curriculum includes lessons on finance and economics, globalization, leadership skills, networking, corporate ethics and race relations.

Program participants will have the beginnings of their own professional network when they graduate in October, said Angela Williams, a chamber board member who coordinates the program with Lewis.

"Now they have this base of 29 people who think and grow their business in the same ways that they do," Williams said. She owns an [Allstate Insurance](#) branch called [Angela Williams Insurance](#) Agency. Allstate sponsored the course materials, and other sponsors have been underwriting events, allowing the chamber to offer the leadership course for free.

Former Denver Mayor Wellington Webb, president and CEO of the Colorado Black Chamber of Commerce, said Lewis' idea of a leadership program fit the chamber's effort to modernize and to cultivate a new generation.

Webb graduated from the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Denver as a first-term state legislator in 1973. The exposure to Denver's political and business institutions was an irreplaceable experience, he said.

Having black professionals get the same exposure while forging strong bonds with other rising stars of the black community should benefit Colorado's entire business community, Webb said.

"We're going to find a whole reservoir of talent that has been there, but they didn't know how to get in," Webb said.