

Inez Kaiser: no 'Prophet without honor'

By L.H. Stanton

She has labored in the vineyards for dozens of years. Never mind that her picture and byline appear in almost every black newspaper in the country, and despite several notable firsts — as a black person as a woman, as a black woman — there is a danger that she could be a prophet without honor, even in the circles she's opened up for her race.

For years before starting her own business, she taught home economics in the public schools of Chicago and Kansas City. It is not surprising then, that she was the first black consultant to land a soft drink account, a pharmaceutical account or a household account. She is Inez Yeagan Kaiser, the first Afro-American woman in the U.S. to successfully establish a public relations firm with national accounts.

"If I were to summarize me," she said in an interview, "I'd say I'm just a pioneer. I'm a self-made woman who has always had the support of my husband. I started with no money, but I had faith in God."

If her idea for a black oriented textbook hadn't been derailed by the K.C. School Board, probably in the wake of the 1954 Supreme Court decision, she might not have even left teaching for a career on her own. Since then, though, she has been blessed with many other important victories — some even in education — confirming the rightness all along of her cause.

Real affirmative action is a concept Kaiser has emphasized and advocated for years. She even has a "pet project" which provides her a podium for sounding that theme — the National Association of Minority Women in Business. NAWMB is a 1,000-person organization whose members are Afro-American, Spanish surname and American Indian women from around the country. The group is led by Kaiser, and headquartered, predictably, in Kansas City.

Many of the affirmative action plans adopted and implemented by some major corporations, she says, will not work because of the prejudices of the white males who are responsible for the design and implementation of the plans, inside the companies themselves, or you remember a similar story about the fox guarding the henhouse.

"Minority women suffer a double discrimination by being a minority person as well as being a woman in the business field," she told Valerie Price of the *Atlanta Constitution*. "Women are the biggest consumers on earth... We control the money, and as far as minority women, in many cases we are the head of the household."

One route some corporations have taken around real affirmative action is been through a legal loophole through the Equal Employment Act is discrimination because of race, age. "There's nothing that requires a corporation or government agency to do business contracts to businesses added by women," she said. "This automatically bars businesses headed

by women and especially those owned and operated by minority businesswomen from gaining contracts with major firms."

Her own career, however, is full of instances of overcoming those odds. "I was able to prove to [several corporations] that a black woman could do something well. All of the jobs I've gotten, I was competing with men. I had the education, but sometimes that didn't count, but I could and did perform."

"I was just a woman who happened to be black and good. Persistence and patience are the biggest things I've learned. Still, I think the thing that keeps me going is my faith in God." That faith is often expressed in self-confidence. "Whatever the mind believes and conceives," she often recites, "it can achieve."

Ironically, Kaiser usually calls the names of men when she lists the corporate friends she's developed over the years, who've helped her gain a foothold in the consumer consulting market. T.M. Jenkins, "Mr. Ted" of Jenkins Music Co. in K.C., and John Vanzant, the director of public relations at I. Walter Thompson advertising agency are two names that she often mentions.

After she secured an office when she first went into business — it was the first office let to a black firm in downtown K.C. — her "next ordeal was to acquire some business," she told K.C. reporter Pat Cowan. "I began to contact numerous local businesses. The answer I became conditioned for was, well yes, we can see that you are qualified, but by the time I contacted Jenkins Music Co. I was quite discouraged, but I never lost my determination to make my venture a reality."

"They realized my capability and also their lack of [black] consumers. From that day until now, they have been clients." In addition, Jenkins introductions have led to other accounts for Kaiser's firm. "Here was an example of top management taking the lead," to achieve real affirmative action, and that was 20 years ago.

The Jenkins account led her to her first national account — Lever Brothers — and to becoming the first female p.r. firm with an account servicing I. Walter Thompson, one of the world's three largest ad agencies.

One of the first services her company offered to black consumers — even before it earned corporate sponsorship from Lever Bros. — was via the Black Press. Her popular column "Fashion-wise and Otherwise" has been written continuously for the 20 years she has been in business, and she wrote another column "Teen Tips," as well as authored and published "Soul Food Cookery," and pamphlets, including "Homemaking from a Girl's Point of View."

The National Newspaper Publishers Association cited Kaiser this year for her 20 years of achievements in public relations and information on consumer issues. But Kaiser's most cherished award came from another black group, the National Business League. The late



Berkeley G. Burrell, the president of NBL, — which was founded in 1900 by Booker T. Washington — and then NBL board chairman Charles T. Williams presented Kaiser the Eartha M. White Women's Achievement Award for being a "pioneer black woman in the fields of public relations, fashions and the food industry."

"The NBL award was my most memorable because I was chosen by my peers, and because I was chosen by a predominantly black male group for recognition."

Still, frontiers remain to be conquered, barriers are yet to be overcome. "I still have to fight. I don't feel that my talents are fully utilized. I'm trying to get an opportunity to do what I know I can do" for clients and for companies not yet in her portfolio.

"Some of them feel that I have taught them what they need to know about working with black consumers," so some don't think they need continued services. "I am very frustrated sometimes, that I can't walk through the door I opened for everyone else," in the world of corporate p.r.

"One thing I haven't been able to do is to get on corporate boards. Companies are choosing black female lawyers instead of businesswomen" for board directorships. In this department, Kaiser

or said, "you need a mentor, a little white angel, and I don't have one."

Now 62, Kaiser has been cited by *Seventeen* magazine as one of the outstanding home economics teachers in the country, and she's a recipient of the Missouri State Teachers Association's "Teacher of the Year" award, and she's been named Business Woman of the Year in Kansas City.

When she started in business in Kansas City 20 years ago, she had one other cross to bear in the professional world — her location. With most advertising and p.r. firms in New York, with Chicago and Los Angeles a distant second and third, Inez Kaiser & Associates had to convince clients like Seven-Up that the Midwest is beautiful.

"I firmly believe a woman has to be able to balance a career and keep a family together. My son was in the ninth grade when I went into business, and I didn't want to relocate," she said of her self-imposed "exile." "I didn't want him educated in New York. Many corporations do have white firms working for them who live in Kansas City."

A company with clients that include I. Walter Thompson, Seven-Up, Sears, Sterling Drug, Sperry and Hutchinson, Continental Baking Co., and Pillsbury, that is dedicated to providing special-