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Carol and Aaron Ammons, the first named honorees, seated in front as Noah Lenstra continues to present the Difference Makers Awards. The awards are part of the eBlackCU symposium being held at the Graduate School of Library Science on the UI campus.

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100 'difference makers' honored as part of conference

Sat, 11/06/2010 - 9:00am | [Patrick Wade](#) 

CHAMPAIGN – The extent of the number of "difference makers" in the area's black community might have been crystallized Friday in how difficult it was to fit them all in one picture.

Organizers eventually got their photograph though, and those honored will have their place in local history through eBlack Champaign-Urbana, a digital collection of black history in Champaign-Urbana.

Friday's event was part of a two-day conference aimed at exploring how to engage the area's poorest neighborhoods with technology, and the "Difference Makers" ceremony was held as part of the documentation process. As dozens of local black leaders came forward to accept their awards, however, it became more than just a photo opportunity.

"I think what it does is it describes not only what has been accomplished, but also what's possible and what's left to be done," said Clarence Shelley, a former dean of students and associate vice chancellor at



Photo by: Robert K. O'Daniell/The News-Gazette

Carol and Aaron Ammons, the first named honorees, seated in front as Noah Lenstra continues to present the Difference Makers Awards. The awards are part of the eBlackCU symposium being held at the Graduate School of Library Science on the UI campus.

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the University of Illinois and one of Friday's honorees.

Shelley was instrumental in organizing Project 500, an initiative aimed at recruiting 500 black students for the UI's 1968 freshman class. It was one of the earliest minority student recruitment efforts in the country.

The event highlighted "the importance of citizen engagement in solving problems," Shelley said, like unemployment, police-community relations and housing.

The difference makers came from all areas of the local community: education leaders like Shelley or church pastors like Bishop Lloyd Gwin, Rev. Eugene Barnes and Rev. Charles Nash.

The list was full of government officials: Champaign council member Will Kyles, Urbana alderman Robert Lewis and county board member Carol Ammons were among them. City staff from both Champaign and Urbana also received awards.

About 100 "difference makers" were honored Friday; most of the honorees were selected as names that continually appeared as eBlackCU staff compiled details of local black history for the digital collection, said project director Noah Lenstra.

"There are hundreds more that we would like to have honored, but we had to exercise a certain degree of selection," Lenstra said.

Willie Summerville, who taught at Urbana Middle School from 1970 to 2005 and now works in the UI's department of African-American Studies, said getting together for events like this is important.

"It keeps the dialogue going, in terms of good things and troublesome things," Summerville said.

Aaron Ammons, a community activist who has spoken out on a gamut of social issues, said Friday's collection of black leaders was "powerful."

"Rarely do you see so many of those people in the same room," Ammons said.

He said the intention of the event is important, too.

"It gives us an opportunity through this new technology to be on the same page and to network," Ammons said.

Carol Ammons, Aaron's wife and another honoree, said it was impressive to see the collection of older leaders who have been making a difference for years.

"They blazed the pathway," she said.

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Conference aims to boost technology in low-income C-U areas

Thu, 11/04/2010 - 9:00am | Patrick Wade

CHAMPAIGN – Organizers are hoping a two-day conference this weekend will churn out some ideas on how Champaign-Urbana's low-income neighborhoods can better use technology to improve their lives.

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Originally designed to dovetail with the federally funded Big Broadband initiative, eBlack Champaign-Urbana has taken a leading role in engaging the area's black communities as they prepare to get online, said project director and University of Illinois graduate student Noah Lenstra. He hopes a free, public symposium spanning Friday and Saturday will further guide that initiative.

"What we really hope comes out of this is building community leadership and tapping into the leadership that already existed," Lenstra said.

eBlackCU was funded by a one-year, \$20,000 grant from the University of Illinois and is being operated through the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, where Lenstra is a student. It is billed as a digital database for documenting African-American history and culture in Champaign-Urbana.

The federally funded Big Broadband project will connect "underserved" neighborhoods to the Internet, but organizers missed out on supplementary grants that would have provided education and training to those potential Internet users. Organizers from eBlackCU have since taken on some of those responsibilities.

And that explains the impetus for this weekend's symposium, Lenstra said.

"We're trying to get people to commit themselves to realizing that technology is important," Lenstra said.

It can make life cheaper, he said, for some people and organizations that operate on tight budgets: If a church can use an e-mail listserve, for example, it can save itself the cost of mailing letters to its

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church can use an e-mail listserv, for example, it can save itself the cost of mailing letters to its members.

"People who don't get involved with technology are going to be falling behind as far as life opportunities, the ability to get jobs," Lenstra said.

The symposium might also precipitate some applications of the Big Broadband system that organizers otherwise would not have imagined. Mike Smeltzer, director of networking for Campus Information Technologies and Educational Services and a lead organizer of Big Broadband, said members of a Champaign church have already made one suggestion: virtual Bible study groups.

"You just flip on your webcams and do it over the net," Smeltzer said. "An application I never would have considered."

Having a conference like this weekend's became more valuable after the federal government chose not to allocate grant money for the education and training components of the Big Broadband project, Smeltzer said.

"At this point, I think this is an organizing effort so that people in the area who are eventually going to get fiber to the home can be in a position where they can do something useful with it," Smeltzer said.

Organizers have planned two full days' worth of events including roundtable discussions, a session honoring 100 "difference makers" in the community and the release of a book detailing the history of the University of Illinois' community engagement efforts.

Lenstra said the group is also hoping to tap into social service groups in the community to figure out how to continue to work after the eBlackCU grant expires.

"This is a really good opportunity for a low-income area in Champaign-Urbana to be at the forefront of society," Lenstra said.

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Details on conference

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Friday

– Symposium begins at 8:30 a.m. at the Graduate School of Library and Information Sciences, 501 E. Daniel St., C.

– Off-campus participants can park at Salem Baptist Church, 500 E. Park St., C., and a free shuttle will take visitors to and from the symposium.

– Events include a roundtable on community engagement at 10:15 a.m., a "Difference Makers Awards Ceremony" at 1 p.m., and the release of a book detailing community engagement at the University of Illinois at 4 p.m.

Saturday

– Symposium resumes at 8:30 a.m. at the Douglass Community Center, 804 N. Fifth St., C.

– Events include a 9:15 a.m. roundtable on social services and digital technology, a 10:45 a.m. discussion on community technology centers, education and youth, and a 1 p.m. roundtable on religious institutions and technology.

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