African American Auto Dealers and Lexus's Commitment to Diversity

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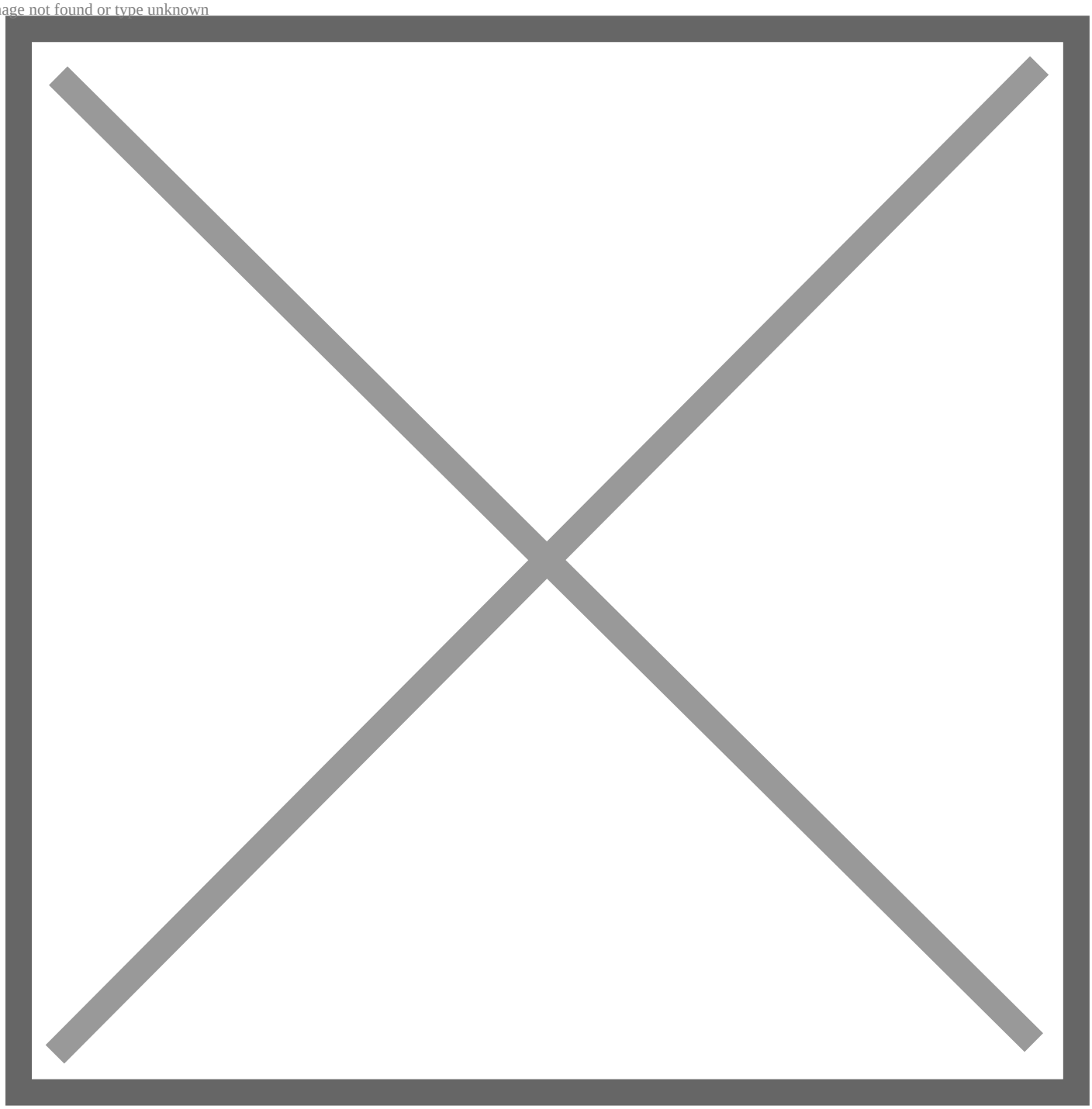


Steven J. Jackson, dealer principal, Toyota of Rockwall (Rockwall, Texas), Toyota of Corvallis (Corvallis, Ore.) and Toyota of Newport (Newport, Ore.) with his wife, Barbara Jackson during the 2020 TLMODA National Day of Service in May.

In the U.S. automotive industry, the contributions of African Americans are woven into the fabric of every sector, beginning with the early days of manufacturing and assembly. Of these contributions, dealer ownership offers the newest path to financial independence for African Americans in automotive and the chance to achieve economic equality. In honor of Black Business Month, here is a look at the ways Toyota Motor North America (TMNA) has worked to open barriers and increase opportunities with organizations like the Toyota Lexus Minority Owners Dealership Association (TLMODA) and Toyota Dealer Investment Group (TDIG), which make available important resources and strategic support for owners.

Such initiatives are part of TMNA's commitment to creating environments where diversity and inclusion thrive, and team members at all levels are supported in an uplifting, engaging and encouraging environment that promotes success.

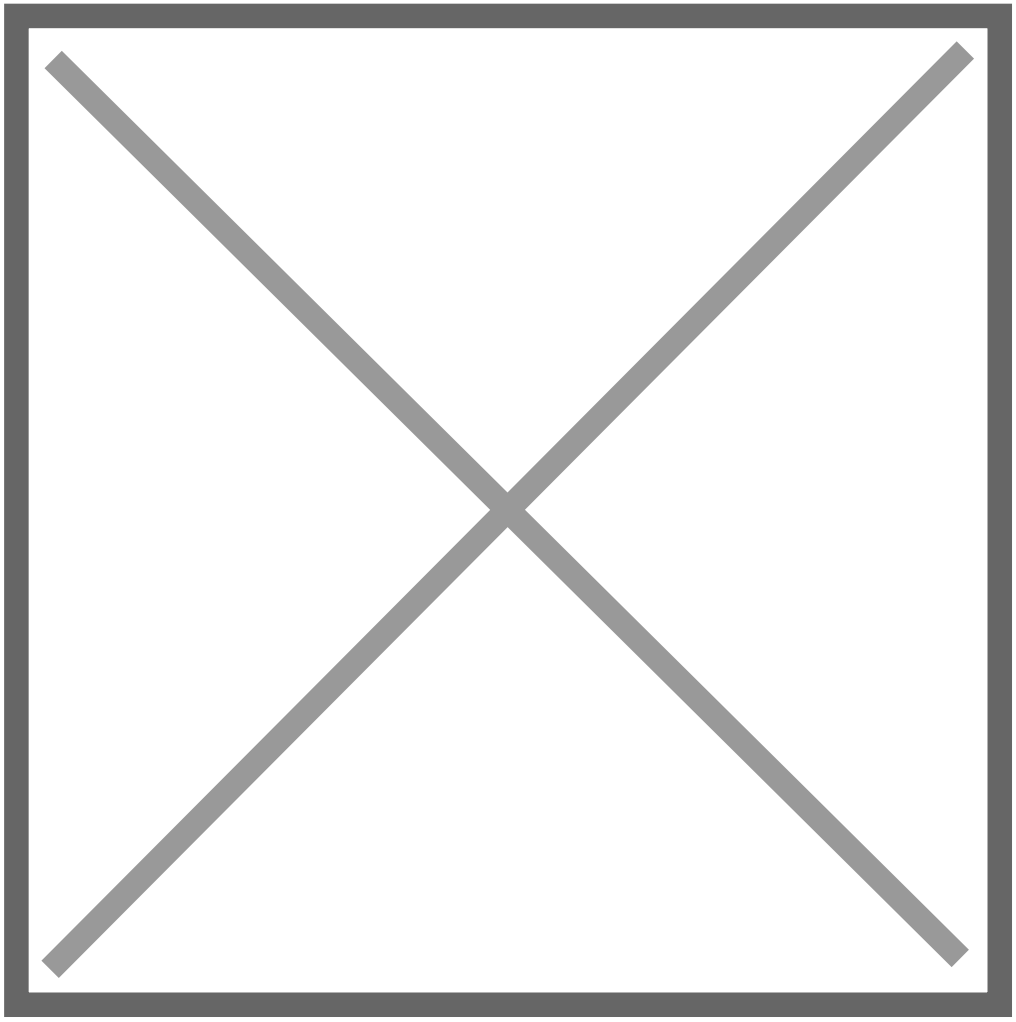
Charting a New Path

The journey towards socioeconomic mobility started with a physical journey.

In response to harsh segregationist laws, bleak financial opportunities and racial injustices, from 1916 to 1970 approximately six million African Americans relocated from rural, southern states to cities in the North, Midwest and West seeking jobs in the expanding industrial economies of those regions.

"When African Americans left the south as part of The Great Migration, the auto industry is what they were coming to," says Frank Washington, an auto industry historian and civil rights activist. "They were coming to jobs. We're talking about people who came from a culture where the day was set by the sun, to a culture where the day was set by a timeclock."

For the first time, it was an opportunity for many African Americans to participate in America's prosperity.

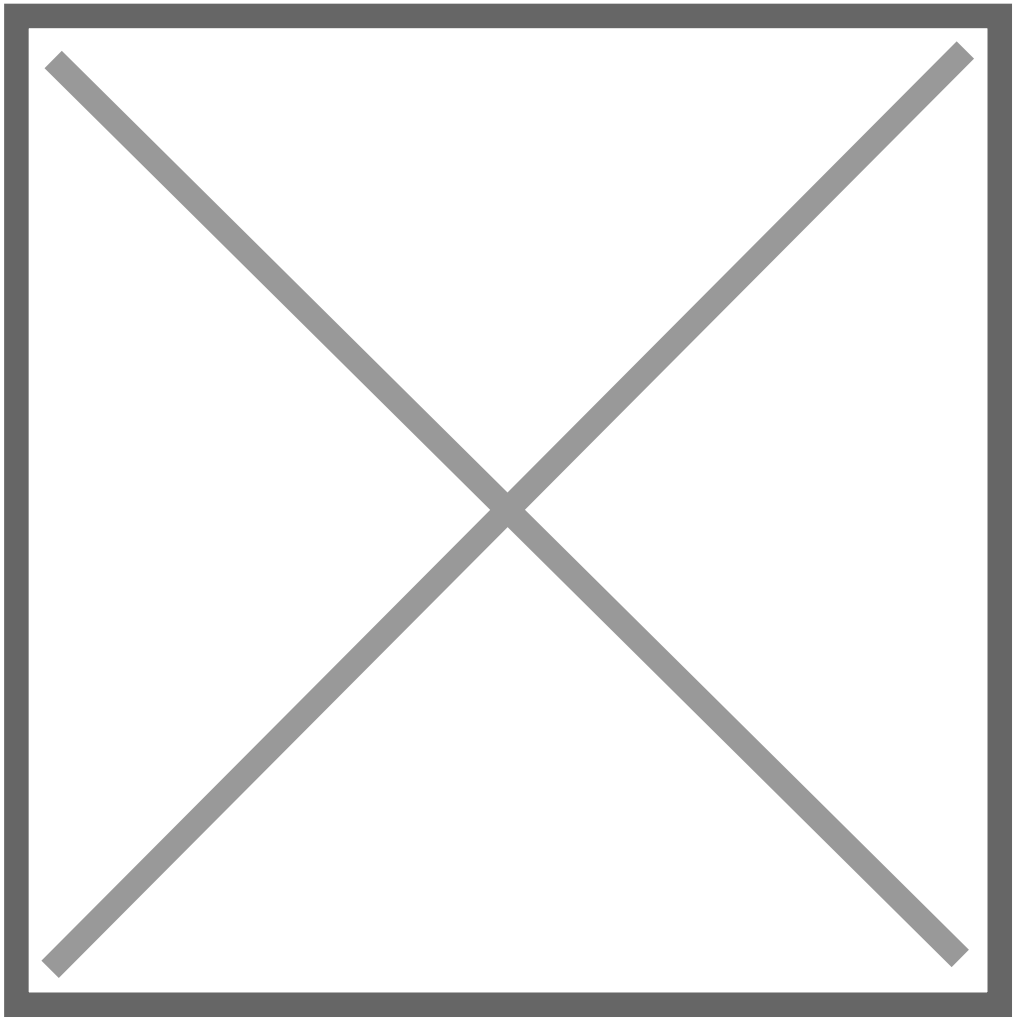


Sanford (Sandy) Woods receiving NAMAD Lifetime Achievement Award in 2015. Sandy owns Treasure Coast Toyota of Stuart and Treasure Coast Lexus. Sandy is the Immediate Past President of Toyota Lexus Minority Owners Dealership Association (TLMODA) and a NAMAD Board Member.

Driving Diversity

While working inside the auto plants represented progress, African American workers longed to hold larger, decision-making roles in other areas of the industry. TMNA recognized the importance of empowering all of its team members, and to do that effectively and successfully, diversity needed to be reflected across the organization.

For Wilburt James, former president at Toyota Motor Manufacturing Kentucky, ensuring that team members were represented in leadership roles within the company became a priority. “I had a passion, and that was around diversity and inclusion,” says James, who was appointed to lead the plant in 2010. “How can you expect women and people of color to feel truly, fully engaged in an environment where they are not in the places where the discussions and decisions are being made? Now, diversity and inclusion are a pretty significant part of what Toyota is. Our entire company is a far, far better place because we have been able to have those kinds of discussions.”



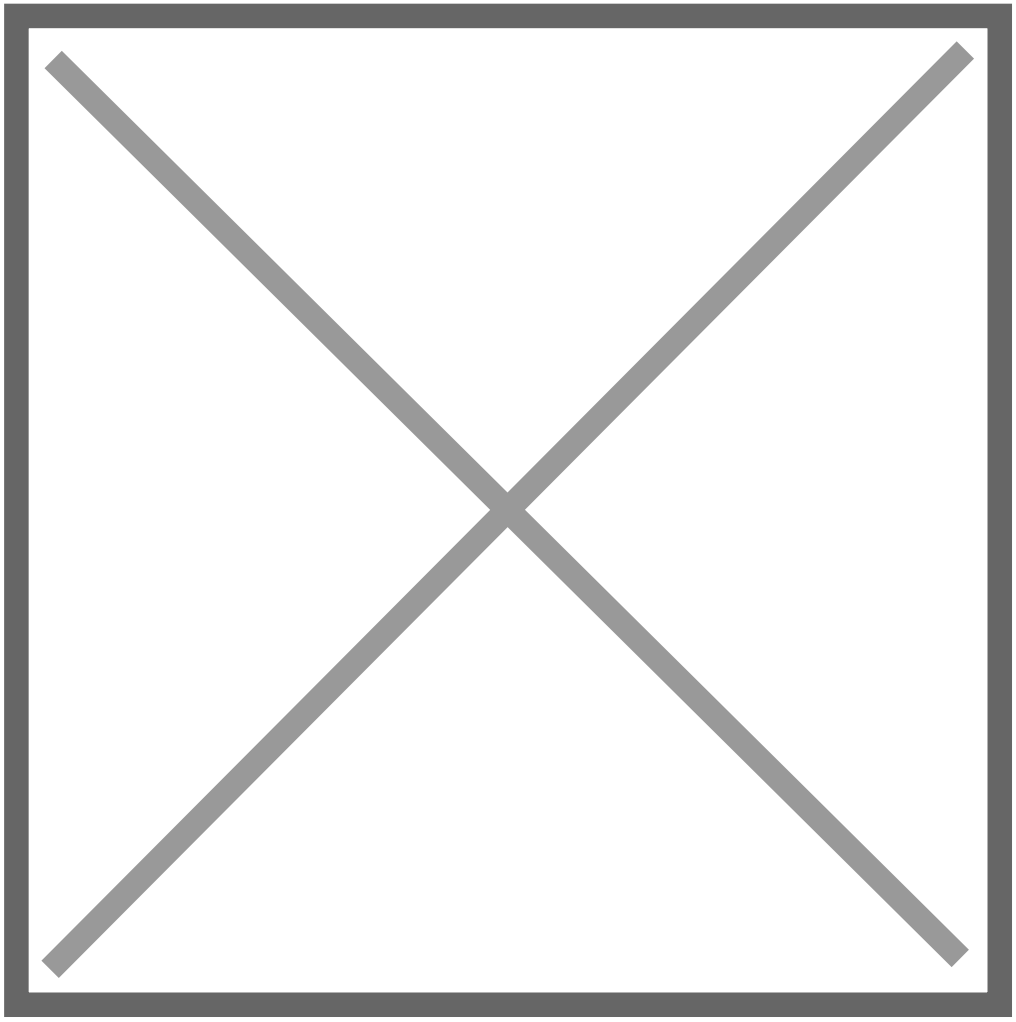
Ellenae Fairhurst receiving NAMAD Women of the Year Award in 2018. Ellenae is the 1st and only AA women to own a Lexus dealership. She owns Lexus of Huntsville.

Empowering Dealers

Increasing opportunities for women and people of color extends well beyond TMNA's plants and offices. Through the TDIG and Toyota Avenues for Advancement Program (TAAP), the company is similarly dedicated to empowering diversity in its dealer network.

One of the newer frontiers for diversity in the industry, minority-owned dealerships are expanding thanks to these programs, which help identify potential dealer candidates through partnerships with organizations like the National Association of Minority Automobile Dealer (NAMAD), dedicated to promoting minority dealers in the United States.

For example, TDIG supports Toyota and Lexus by providing capital, plus operational and management support, to qualified dealerships, including those that are minority-owned. And partnerships with organizations such as NAMAD foster entrepreneurship and empower African American dealers — a step toward combatting the inequalities and obstacles that historically stifle opportunity.



Ed Fitzpatrick (deceased) receiving the NAMAD Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013. Ed owned Coliseum Lexus of Oakland and Valley Lexus. Ed is an early collaborator with NAMAD.

African American dealers further that reach by investing in the communities where their dealerships are located.

As Damon Lester, president of the National Association of Minority Automobile Dealers, says, “You look at all the direct and indirect support that a dealership provides within that community, it plays an intricate role creating a circle of life of how cash circulates through the community.”

Indeed, the circle of life is seen in the dealerships themselves, as African American economic opportunity and influence builds on the foundation laid by the workers of the Great Migration. Says Lester, “The role that black dealers play today is as pillars of the community.”