Three longtime champions of workplace diversity will be honored at the 21th annual Multicultural Forum on Workplace Diversity, a two-day national training conference that will be held March 3 and 4 at the St. Paul RiverCentre.

The forum began in 1988 as a two-hour videoconference and has grown into the region's leading event for advancing diversity in the workplace. This year's event will draw 2,000 participants from 25 states.

Receiving a Winds of Change Award at the forum's Wednesday, March 4, luncheon will be Dr. Ghafar Lakanwal, of Bloomington, founder and executive director of the Bloomington-based MultiCultural Development Center, and Leondias (Lee) Butcher, of Orono, senior director of workplace inclusion at Medtronic Inc. in Minneapolis. The award recognizes sustained support for workplace diversity.

Receiving a Friend of the Forum Award will be Syl Booth, Maplewood. Now retired, she formerly held diversity-related positions with the state of Minnesota and Hennepin County. The award recognizes her many years of support for the Multicultural Forum.

- Lakanwal, an expert in managing workforce diversity and developing cross-cultural relationships, founded the MultiCulturalDevelopment Center in 1991. A native of Afghanistan, a Muslim and now an American citizen, Lakanwal completed his doctorate in agriculture in Germany and served as minister of agriculture for the pre-Soviet government in Afghanistan. He has studied, worked, lived and traveled in more than 30 countries and is fluent in five languages. The nonprofit MultiCultural DevelopmentCenter promotes multicultural understanding and inclusiveness in the workplace as well as in the community. Lakanwal

serves on the board of the Council of Asian-Pacific Minnesotans. He has received the Exemplary Practices Award from the American Society for Public Administration, the Omar Bonderud Award from the Human Rights Commission of Bloomington, and the Immigrant Achievement Award from the International Leadership Institute.

- Butcher, of Medtronic, is being honored as a champion of diversity and inclusion in the hiring, retention and promotion of employees. His efforts have led to strong relationships with historically Black colleges and an increase in women and minorities at leadership levels. According to the Multicultural Forum's awards committee, Butcher has developed several innovative tools that have expanded diversity initiatives throughout Medtronic and "has successfully influenced senior leadership, human resources and the overall employee base by making a connection between the Medtronic mission and the business case for diversity and inclusion."

- Early in her career, Booth was a social welfare worker in Los Angeles and later worked for the Minnesota Department of Human Rights. She worked for Hennepin County for 20 years and retired as its affirmative action director. As a 14-year volunteer with the Multicultural Forum, she helped with planning; served as a greeter, moderator, registrar and evaluator; recruited other volunteers and forum participants; and spent hours stuffing folders.

"It was an easy decision to honor Syl Booth with the 2009 Friend of the Forum award," the committee said.

“Diversity's Challenge: Achieving True Inclusion” is the theme of this year’s Multicultural Forum. Co-hosts are the Opus College of Business at the University of St. Thomas and the Twin Cities chapter of the National Black MBA Association. The forum is presented by General Mills and receives support from more than 90 firms and organizations.

Ken Powell, chairman and CEO of General Mills, Dr. Nat Irvin, a diversity and inclusion futurist from the University of Louisville, and Luke Visconti, partner and co-founder of DiversityInc, will deliver keynote presentations.

The forum is designed for professionals who manage a diverse workforce, work in a diverse environment or are responsible for diversity within organizations of all sizes. It also is recommended for anyone working with a multicultural clientele.

Participants can choose to attend just the institutes or workshops on March 3, just the forum on March 4, or a combination of these. For more information or to register, visit http://www.stthomas.edu/mcf/ or call (651) 962-4385 or e-mail bjvoorheesbl@stthomas.edu
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