

Toyota Unveils the 2013 Avalon: "Great cars do not happen without great people"

Written by Yvonne Coleman Bach, Associate Publisher/Editor, Louisville Defender Newspaper
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Toyota recently unveiled their 2013 Avalon at a press junket in Cincinnati. The event not only provided the media in attendance with a look at the newly designed vehicle, but also an inside look at the company who makes it and their strong commitment to diversity.



Billed a luxury car without the luxury price tag, the Avalon is sure to be a favorite among the African American consumer market. Members of the press got the chance to drive the impressive vehicle and see it being made at the Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky, Inc. (TMMK) Plant. The plant sits on 1,300 acres and employs about 6,600 people with a payroll of

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about \$492 million. Their annual production capacity is an impressive 500,000 vehicles and 600,000 engines. In addition to the Avalon, the plant produces Camry, Camry Hybrid, Avalon Hybrid, Venza, 4-cylinder and V6 engines, axles steering components, machined blocks, cylinder heads, crankshafts, camshafts, rods and axles assemblies/dies.



James S. Colon, Vice President-Toyota Product Communications, Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc. said, "Great Cars do not happen without Great People." Although he was not referring to himself when he made the statement, Colon is truly one of the great people at Toyota. He was just one of the great people from Toyota in attendance at the Press event. Toyota has a diversity strategy that is working. According to Colon, 30 percent of the workforce is people of color.

Colon is responsible for gathering and managing information and promotion initiatives for Toyota brand vehicles in addition to product and sales training. He began his career in 1980 and he has held various roles at Toyota regional offices and at TMS headquarters in Torrance, California, that include general manager for the Portland Region and the Chicago Region. He was also vice president of sales and dealer development for the Lexus Division. Most recently, he served as vice president for sales for the Toyota Division where he was responsible for sales support for Toyota's regional offices, public companies and private distributors.

His education background includes a bachelor's degree in economics and business from Manchester College in North Manchester, Ind., where he currently serves on the Board of Trustees along with Clark University in Atlanta, GA. He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Human Letters from Martin University in Indianapolis in May, 2011.

Colon serves on the Board of Directors for the Black Star Project, The First Tee of South Los Angeles, California State University -Los Angeles and others. Most recently, he was appointed to the board of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, where he supports its mission by

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contributing to developing leaders, informing policy and educating the public.

Another great person of Toyota is Wilbert W. (Wil) James, Jr. James is President of Toyota Motor Manufacturing, Kentucky, Inc. When he gave an overview of the facility, he talked with great pride. He said, "We are proud of the way we do business."

James became the seventh president of TMMK in July 2010. It is the largest plant in North America. His first position at Toyota was actually at TMMK in 1987. Over a 20 year period, he served in various positions including General Manager of Assembly and General Manager of Production Administration. He served as vice president of Manufacturing from 2003-2006. He has also served in positions at other facilities including Toyota's Princeton, Indiana facility as Senior Vice President for Manufacturing and Quality. He also worked in Long Beach, California as President of TABC Inc.

He was educated at Old Dominion University where he received his Associate's degree (1976) and Bachelors of Science degree (1978) in Mechanical Engineering Technology. James believes in diversity. A Diversity of Champion for TEMA, he leads company-wide diversity and inclusion initiatives across North America. He is an active member of the Community, serving on the Board of Directors for the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and the Bluegrass Economic Advancement Movement. He is also involved with the Executive Leadership Conference and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity.

When asked how he has been successful in making Diversity Work at his facility, James said he is involved at the grassroots level. He said he believes that everyone is an integral part of the team and makes that known to everyone. "That is the Toyota Way," he said. James also said they work to set up programs where the employees can also work together going out and helping people in the community. He said in addition, Toyota donates money for a variety of causes in the community.

The company has received numerous awards in the area of diversity that include:

- "Top 50 Company for Diversity" by *DiversityInc* for six years. In 2012, in addition to the being included in the list of Top 50 Companies for Diversity overall, Toyota also ranked seventh in *DiversityInc's* Top 10 Companies for LGBT Employees.
- "40 Best Companies for Diversity" by *Black Enterprise Magazine* for the past seven years.
- *Hispanic Business Magazine's* "Top 60 Company for Diversity" for the past three years.
- 2011 "Corporation of the Year" by the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC).
- Proud member of the "Billion Dollar Roundtable" , recognizing more than \$1 billion in annual spending with certified ethnic and women-owned suppliers.

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Another great person at Toyota, Latondra Newton, was promoted to Group Vice President at TMA in 2013. She began her career at Toyota in 1991. She has held a variety of positions including general manager of the Team Member Development Center (TDC) at Toyota Motor Engineering & Manufacturing North America, Inc. (TEMA). As assistant general manager of Human Resources, Newton started the corporate diversity function for North American manufacturing. She was also responsible for state and federal legislative/regulatory activity, media relations and community relations in her role as assistant general manager of Corporate Affairs.

Newton received her bachelor's degree in management systems from Kettering University in Michigan. She was named as one of the 100 Leading Women in the North American Automotive Industry in 2010 and she was recognized as a Rising Star under 35 in 2000. As a member of the Board of directors for the Manufacturing Institute, she chairs a new initiative focused on enhancing opportunities for women to enter and grow in professional careers in the manufacturing industry.

It was Rob McConnell, Sr. Design Engineer at the Toyota Technical Center in Michigan, however, that brought the focus on the Avalon. McConnell is the Principal Engineer having worked on the design team for the 2013 Avalon.

A member of the Michigan Design Team, McConnell is just 35 years old and is moving up the ladder fast. He has been with Toyota for his entire professional career. A graduate of the University of Michigan, he interned at Toyota while attending college. After graduating in 2001 with a degree in mechanical engineering, he remained at the Technical Center and began his employment in the Body Design Department, which he now leads the team of 10 plus. He said his team is unique in there are a lot of young people on his team. According to McConnell, on a typical day he and his team members can be seen with their headphones on rocking to The Roots or Common as they are getting inspired.

McConnell's team has taken the lead in seven different Toyota vehicles including the Venza, Solara and Tundra, however, the Avalon was the first car that was totally designed and built outside of Japan. He said the Avalon has completely been re-styled and it has been eight years in the making.

The sleek design and body style of the 2013 Avalon makes it "Sexy." The vehicle makes a bold statement with the larger grill, the larger standard rim sizes and the innovative headlamps. The car has been designed to attract the African American and Urban markets. Actor Idris Elba is the vehicle's new spokesperson.

McConnell is making the imaginary possible at Toyota. He takes a design on a piece of paper and puts it on the road. He is truly one of the Great People at Toyota making Great Cars.