

Determined to Rise

By Sherry Linkon

A word processor says she has found the right key for making it in the business world.

In a small cubicle office in the Voinovich Center downtown, a petite black woman with a quick bright smile spends her day typing. Shawanda Boss-McIntosh is a Word Processor Specialist with the Industrial Commission of Ohio. If you've filed a complaint requesting money to pay for medical care after an accident at work, Shawanda may have been the person preparing your documents.



Her cubicle is one of a row of eight or nine, in a large room with big windows. She's decorated her small space with pictures of her husband and three children, photos of African-Americans she admires, and quotes that inspire her. But she spends most of the day looking at a computer screen. The hearing officers record or jot down their rulings, and Shawanda transcribes them into formal documents: "It is the order of the District Hearing Officer that this claim is disallowed or allowed for . . ."

It's repetitive work -- the same kinds of documents saying similar things, over and over, about twenty a day. She's been doing this for more than three years.

Still, every day is a little different. The hearing officer may assign different kinds of documents, and Shawanda has some control over her when she does the work. She may have 10 decisions to type up, but "I can wait to start them until 11 if I want." Of course, that would create a crunch in the afternoon, but that's her choice, and she likes it that way. "I can work at my own pace," she says. She always completes each day's work before she leaves in the afternoon. "That's just the type of person I am." She lives in Warren, so getting to the office takes about half an hour each way.

"When you have three children and a husband," Shawanda laughs, "the commute is relaxing. That's my time." But her job also provides some time for talking with coworkers or reading, while she waits for assignments. The relaxed, "peaceful" setting is one of the things she likes best about the job. At her previous job, at Delphi Packard, she was on her feet all day, 8-10 hours, and the combination of the machines and the music each worker played to get through the day made the factory very loud. It was physically exhausting.

This job is "a piece of cake," compared with Delphi, Shawanda says. It "doesn't even take a mind." Because the decisions and dockets she prepares follow the same

format, and because she's done so many, the work is easy. She likes that this job gives her time and opportunity to think about other things. At 34, she's using that time well to plan her own future. She hopes to move up into a higher level position, probably in human resources, after she finishes her business degree at YSU. She takes one or two classes every semester. "I love that they let you leave work to go to school, and they pay for part of it." Often, she takes courses during the day, using her lunch period to make a quick dash to campus for a mid-day class.

She's also thoughtful about her position in her workplace. All of her co-workers have been there for at least ten years, so she's the newest member of the staff. She's also the only African American. Soon after Shawanda was hired, the assistant manager had spread a rumor that she had "had an outburst," which started her off on the wrong foot. "I didn't know if I could trust anyone," she says.

In part because of that, she got involved with the union. She represents her co-workers as a steward in the AFSCME union local, representing them at union meetings and in grievances. This helped her learn about her rights and use the union contract to her own advantage. Most of her co-workers "feel that the union sucks," but she likes the benefits and protections it provides.

She took this job during a temporary lay-off from Delphi Packard, where she worked for 10 years. She took the civil service exam on a fluke, but she scored in the top ten. She took a \$2000 pay cut to take this job, but she wanted to work in a more professional setting, to start moving herself up in the business world. She misses the extra time off that she sometimes got when Delphi would shut down for a few weeks in the summer. Still, she says, "This is something to hold on to." She takes inspiration from a W.E.B. DuBois quote on one wall of her cubicle: "There is in this world no such force as the force of a man determined to rise." Shawanda is determined to rise. She believes the opportunity to get an education and gain office experience will pay off in the long run. She sees this job as a good "stepping stone to something else." Her plan is to get a better job in business once she finishes school: "I want to make 40 grand," she says with a laugh, as if she thinks she's being a little audacious, though she makes about \$30,000 a year now. She looks forward to the day when she will have enough autonomy at work to be able to "go to my office, close the door, and come out when I want to."

Someday, she'd like to open a daycare center. "That's my heart," Shawanda says, with teaching and with children. That would also give her what she wants most: "I don't have to be the boss, but I want to be able to have a little more control."