THE PRESSURES ON A BLACK EXECUTIVE; RANKING VOLKSWAGEN OFFICIAL A SUICIDE AT 31

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William Brock was a comer and a climber - an ambitious man who wore Lacoste sport shirts, drove an imported German car and spoke one moment about raising $9 million to buy a hotel and the next about founding his own consulting firm.

At 31, he was earning about $40,000 a year from Volkswagen of America. He ran an office-cleaning business on the side. When he bought a house on an all- white street in an all-white neighborhood in a small town 40 miles west of here, he told a friend who worked with him in the local NAACP that he was doing it simply because it was a "good buy."

Brock was the highest-ranking and most highly visible black working for Volkswagen - an administrator in the personnel department, spokesman for a group of black employees lobbying for better treatment and more minority hires, and the newly elected president of the Washington, Pa., NAACP.

Early last month, Brock shot himself in the head.

His suicide came at the end of four years of increasingly bitter dealings between him and Volkswagen management over the treatment of black employees, disagreements that culminated in his writing an angry letter to Volkswagen's German management and joining a $70- million racial discrimination lawsuit against the company.

It came, too, at the end of months of growing tensions between Brock and other blacks at the company and in Pittsburgh who saw him as a "company man," too trusting of Volkswagen's policies. And it came at the end of what Brock felt - and Volkswagen denies - was a campaign to harass and discredit him.

Two days before he died, a Volkswagen lawyer told Brock a white female employee had filed a complaint against him charging sexual harassment, a charge other black mangers inside and outside Volkswagen say is the most dangerous a black male executive can face.

"I was in a position of trying to help the company by avoiding the (discrimination* suit and help change the conditions for the better for the (black* employees," Brock wrote in a statement the day he died. "But the company was willing to hurt me and allow an appearance that I was selling out . . . for personal gain or because I had something to hide."

When friends and members of his family talk about Brock, conversation invariably turns to his ego. "He was so sure of himself," says Dennis Powell, a black insurance agent in Pittsburgh and a fraternity brother of Brock at the University of Pittsburgh. "Sometimes it went beyond realism."

Much of Brock's self-confidence stemmed from his upbringing. The youngest of eight children, he grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood, went to a high school which then, as now, was heavily Jewish and about 30 percent black, and was elected to the student council. His father worked in a steel mill and his mother was an American Indian. All the Brock children went on to college; William Brock went to Pitt.

Brock's upbringing was secure, but it was also protected. Asked to describe some of the shaping events of Brock's life, his sister, Haisela Dorsey, doesn't mention racial harassment or taunts, but how when he was 7 he would sell soda pop to construction workers across the street.

Brock eventually graduated with a degree in public administration from Pitt. For a time, however, he became a Black Muslim and dropped out of college - drawn as much by the Muslim doctrine of self- reliance, friends say, as by the religion's antipathy towards whites. Brock changed his name to William 19X, married his wife, Renae, and sold fish from a van to the small black community in Washington, Pa.

Although he was a Muslim in name when he died, Brock began to drift awayfrom the faith after about four years, frtiends say. He ended his self- employment and took jobs with the Pennsylvania Human Rights Commission and helped run a CETA employment program in Washington, Pa. Then, in 1977, Volkswagen announced plans to build a plant in New Stanton, Pa., and recruited Brock to become the company's equal employment officer. It was Brock's first corporate job; he was 26.

Ray Gross, in charge of the Richmond, Va., area for the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Co., runs seminars for black managers and executives designed to explore the kinds of stress black managers face.

There are conflicting loyalties, Gross warns the executives: They will want to be loyal to the corporation, but also to the black community. Racism shows up in subtle, ugly ways - jokingly calling a black executive "boy" at a party, or telling racial jokes in his presence.

Confronted with that sort of stress, Gross tells the black managers, they will usually be afraid to seek help. They'll interpret their feeling of stress to mean: "The job is too tough for you." They'll look for the answers inside themselves, instead of outside, in the way the corporation deals with them.

Gross' description fits William Brock, who had taken one of the seminars.

Named affirmative-action officer for Volkswagen in 1977, Brock foundhimself immediately at odds with most of Pittsburgh's black leadership, and gradually with many of its more militant black employees. The Volkswagen plant at New Stanton was the first the German company was planning to build in America. When fully operational, it would employ almost 6000 people and turn out more than 1000 cars a day.

The Pittsburgh NAACP wanted to get a significant number of blacks hired at the company (Pittsburgh is about 25 percent black). When the group was dissatisfied with Volkswagen's response, it set up picket lines at the plant and proposed a boycott of Volkswagen products. On television, Brock was frequently the Volkswagen official explaining the company's position.

"Brock was trying to act as the keeper of the peace: Let's not rock the boat,' " says Harvey Adams, president of the Pittsburgh NAACP. There was a perception among some blacks, Adams says, that Brock was being "obstructionist."

That was Brock's public image. Privately, in memorandums to his supervisors at Volkswagen, Brock as early as 1979 was charging New Stanton's top executives with "severe race discrimination against me and blacks as a class at VW," including discrimination in hiring, promotion and salary. Brock, for example, was transferred out of the equal employment job after six months and made a production supervisor, a move he protested but that the company said was necessary for "career development."

Those charges - denied by Volkswagen in court papers - subsequently became the grounds for a $70-million lawsuit filed against the company by nine black employees and job applicants on Jan. 4. Company spokesman Chet Bahn said the company will not comment further on the charges while the case is in litigation.

There was an uglier side to life at Volkswagen. Beginning in early 1982, memos from Brock and his successor as equal opportunity officer, Ronald Saunders, listed cases of black managers finding dead fish, live snakes and Ku Klux Klan literature on their desks and "Nigger" scribbled on some of their papers.

In his personal file, Brock kept a scurrilous "Nigger Application For Employment" someone had put on his desk. "It is not necessary to attach a photo since you all look alike," the form read. "In 50 words or less list your greatest desire in life (other than a white girl)."

Bahn, Volkswagen's spokesman, said the company has been conducting an internal investigation into these charges.

Despite these growing pressures, Brock - true to Gross' prediction - did not share his feelings with friends or colleagues. (Brock's wife declined to be interviewed.)

He did not tell his best friend, Dennis Powell, about the scurrilous "application for employment." He did not tell Ray Gross, who ran a stress seminar for the Washington, Pa., NAACP that Brock attended, about his frustrations at Volkswagen. He did not tell Joan Griffin, his friend in the local NAACP, that the house in a white neighborhood he had bought as a "good buy" had had a cross burned on its lawn in 1982, and that he had decided to keep his father's old gun in the house for protection.

Part of the reason Brock did not talk about his feelings, friends and co- workers acknowledge, is that many people did not want to listen. With his confident manner and buoyant energy, Brock was the kind of person others naturally turned to as a leader. Straight from work, he would drive to the storefront office of the Washington, Pa., NAACP and talk to black workers who were having problems at their jobs. He rarely talked with the people in Washington, Pa., about what was happening at Volkswagen.

Over Christmas and New Year's, in the weeks before he died, Brock talked confidently about being able to resolve the complaints of black employees at Volkswagen, according to his sister Dorsey. Since August he had been spokesman for the company Black Caucus, a liaison between the dissatisfied blacks and management. On Wednesday, Jan. 5, the two groups would meet, and Volkswagen, Dorsey says Brock told her, was going to make "big concessions."

On Tuesday, Jan. 4, nine members of the Black Caucus filed the $70-million lawsuit against Volkswagen - without telling Brock. "Many of the members had no faith in an internal resolution," said one member of the caucus, who asked not be named. At the meeting with caucus members the next day, Volkswagen offered to promote certain blacks at the company and give others salary increases. In a handwritten statement he later tore up but which was reconstructed by his attorney, Brock called the offer "crumbs."

After the meeting, a Volkswagen lawyer called Brock into his office and told him a white female employee had filed a sexual harassment complaint against Volkswagen, naming Brock. Bahn, Volkswagen's spokesman, says Brock was told at that time that the charge would not imperil his job.

Brock's sister believes it was the harassment charge that pushed Brock to suicide: It threatened to hurt his family and destroy his reputation - and as the new head of the NAACP in town, his reputation would have to be "undamaged."

Dennis Powell believes Brock's suicide was another example of his impulsiveness and ego. On Thursday, Brock decided to join the suit against Volkswagen. Friday afternoon he gave a lengthy interview to a Pittsburgh newspaper outlining his complaints against the company. On the way home that evening, Powell believes, Brock felt his world collapsing. How could he go back to Volkswagen after joining the suit? Had he done the right thing?.

He shot himself at home Friday night.

Several hundred people attended Brock's funeral: Volkswagen employees and managers, members of the Pittsburgh and Washington, Pa., NAACP, friends from Brock's college fraternity, his three children.

At the funeral, Brock's sister Haisela read from her brother's favorite poem, the one he had recited from heart at a NAACP banquet and would recite walking around his living room: "Invictus," by William Henley.

The poem reads, in part:

In the fell clutch of circumstance

I have not winced nor cried aloud.

Abstract (Document Summary)

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