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## Keynote speaker tells chamber to appreciate America

*A visit to Africa helps Robert L. Wallace see 'land of opportunity'*

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It took a visit to Africa for Robert L. Wallace to realize that America was "truly the land of opportunity."

Wallace, the keynote speaker at the North Alabama African American Chamber of Commerce's awards banquet Friday night, said he saw the depths of hopelessness when he went to Kenya to speak at a college commencement.

The graduation itself, in which 10,000 people showed up to see the graduation at a 3,000-student college, was inspirational, he said. But what he saw in the streets -- the AIDS epidemic, poverty and economic disparity -- made him appreciate what America has to offer.

"Those people would give their right arm to come



to America," he said. "With all of our problems, issues and weaknesses, this is still the greatest country on the face of the Earth."

Wallace is president and CEO of the BiTH Group, an information technology consulting business, and author of several books, including "Black Wealth - Your Road to Small Business Success."

Though opportunity is there, Wallace said, minority business owners must work together to foster not just economic, but political, social and spiritual success, he said.

"Our individual

success is based upon, contingent upon, our collective success," Wallace said.

The awards banquet topped the day, which featured the chamber's annual Business Opportunity Expo and Job Fair.

The expo, which features workshops for business owners and prospective entrepreneurs, is designed to help minority-owned businesses achieve the collective success Wallace spoke of; said Jerry Mitchell, executive director of the chamber.

The theme this year was "Prepare for Success," and featured workshops on grant writing, starting a small business, finding financing, marketing, investing in property and international trade opportunities.

"A lot of small businesses are not fully prepared for

what they're about to get into," Mitchell said. "In a lot of instances, they start off in a bind."

Lack of a marketing strategy, a financing plan or a fully developed business plan are typical weaknesses, Mitchell said.

The chamber offers consulting services for small business owners throughout the year as well, he said.

The job fair, which was sparsely attended on a rainy Friday, is aimed at keeping promising young people at home by finding them jobs in Huntsville after graduation, Mitchell said.

Companies and individuals honored at Friday's awards banquet were:

- **Engineering Services Unlimited Inc.**, Huntsville Business of the Year, industrial services. Engineering Services Unlimited was ranked No. 376 in *Inc.* magazine's

500 Fastest Growing Small Companies listing in 2001.

- **Southland Total Healthcare Systems**, Decatur, Business of the Year, professional services. Southland expanded its business in 2001, opening a satellite office in Huntsville.

- **Ralph D. Malone**, president of Triana Industries Inc., Madison, Entrepreneur of the Year. Malone's company, which was named Alabama Manufacturer of the Year for medium-size companies by the Alabama Technology Network and the Business Council of Alabama, doubled in size in 2001. Triana Industries added 100 employees in 2001 and 2002 and increased sales from \$15 million to \$30 million.

- **Kapil Sharma** of MetLife Financial Services for outstanding service as volunteer to the chamber.