MaryAnne Howland, president and CEO of Ibis Communications in Nashville, Tenn., was shocked when she went to her first Daytona 500 and saw more Confederate flags than black faces among the 200,000 fans.

But when white fans see dozens of African-American middle schoolers and their families at the Music City Motorplex in Nashville, it’s a heartening surprise: The race is a reward for the students’ academic excellence.

The Music City Motor Sports Institute, started by Howland, music producer Jim Ed Norman and Joe Mattioli, who holds the lease on the Motorplex, brings together academic incentive and career opportunities for urban youngsters and new fans and participants for racing.

“I don’t know how many people of color are watching racing,” says Howland, who joined the effort with no background in racing because her agency specializes in diversity and inclusion, and she has experience working with schools and youth groups.

“In the inner city we’re starting, helping to promote an interest in racing from a very young age. When our school comes out, we change the color of the audience.”

The families’ presence also changes the flavor of the event for longtime race fans, who hear the achievements of students who won the privilege. One male student read 51 books in 10 weeks; another read 40. One who read the most waved the checkered flag. Some rode in pace cars.

“They really were the heroes of the day,” Howland says. “Our mission is to inspire academic excellence by rewarding kids with an experience at the racetrack. They really embraced the program.”

The institute is developing an educational curriculum with components called Read to Race, Math in Motion, Science of Speed and Art of Racing.

When the institute brought race cars to the school to launch the program at Isaac Litton Middle School in Nashville in the fall of 2007, Howland recalls, “the kids were through the roof with excitement. All the stars were there.”

In its second year, the program involves two middle schools and one elementary. Inquiries have come from as far as Louisville, Los Angeles and New York, and teachers and principals are eager to use the incentives.

“It’s exciting,” Howland says. “It’s glamorous. It’s different. If we just mention it, people get it right away.”

Organizers hope the education component will win support for the nonprofit agency from corporations and other sources that would not typically be interested in racing by itself.

“This is not an easy thing within the market for a million reasons, most of them obvious,” she says, adding that racing officials have embraced the effort enthusiastically. “It seems there is a common desire for diversity, but actually achieving it is a challenge.”

At the same time, the institute introduces urban young people to possible careers in racing — not only driving, but a wide range from mechanic to track operator to public relations — and invites them to become fans.

“The racing motive is we want to bring as many people of color out to the tracks as possible,” Howland says, adding that Norman is widely known for promoting such opportunities.

“His three passions have always been music and then racing and then diversity. Within the music he has always carved out quite a reputation for uplifting people of color.”

Mattioli, whose family owns the Pocono Raceway in Pennsylvania and a track in Virginia that was African-American racing pioneer Wendell Scott’s base, says he wants to be involved in broadening the sport.

“Getting to know his family got me really excited about any diversity opportunity that could move forward,” Mattioli says. “Our hope is to really be colorblind and look at all these children who have a desire and demonstrate talent.”

Giving potential racing professionals an early start is vital to the future of both the sport and the youngsters.

“Racing starts with 4-year-olds, 5-year-olds, just like Tiger Woods learned golf,” Howland says. “That’s how a career begins in racing.”