The mission of Neighborhood Leadership Fellows (NLF) is to increase and amplify the voices of North St. Louis City and North St. Louis County residents at the civic decision-making tables in order to produce more equitable regional policies for neighborhoods. The primary geographic focus area is neighborhoods within the St. Louis Promise Zone due to the well-documented need for more targeted investment.
Pictures by Maleeha Ahmad
Stories by Justin Seaton
2020 COHORT
GRADUATES

THE 2020 COHORT CONSISTS OF 22 LEADERS FROM NORTH ST. LOUIS CITY AND NORTH ST. LOUIS COUNTY.

JULIA ABERNATHY           PENROSE/CITY
MEGAN BETTS               ST. LOUIS PLACE/CITY
MARY CHANDLER             THE VILLE/CITY
AUDREY ELLERMANN          COVENANT BLU/CITY
DELESHA GEORGE            ACADEMY/CITY
KAREN GREER               GREATER VILLE/CITY
ELTOREON HAWKINS          WALNUT PARK/CITY
KRISTINA HAZLEY           NORTHWOODS/COUNTY
KYLE LACKEY               FLORISSANT/COUNTY
TREVAUGHN LATIMER         DOWNTOWN WEST/CITY
JANETT LEWIS              SPANISH LAKE/COUNTY
ALAN MUELLER              FERGUSON/COUNTY
DAWN PRICE                WEST END/CITY
EBONIE REED               VELDA CITY/COUNTY
PAULETTE SANKOFA          OLD NORTH/COUNTY
CATHERINE SMITH-MORGAN    ACADEMY/CITY
SHAVANNA SPRATT           FERGUSON/COUNTY
TONI STOVALL              O’FALLON/CITY
QUINTON WARD              SPANISH LAKE/COUNTY
SUNDY WHITESIDE           WALNUT PARK EAST/CITY
ALICE WILSON              JENNINGS/COUNTY
MICHAEL WOODS             HYDE PARK/CITY

Photo by Dwayne T. James
About five minutes into the phone interview for this profile, Julia Abernathy, Founder and Director of St. Louis Youth Build, was interrupted by someone walking into her office. She happily stopped talking about herself and gave them all of her attention, asking about their family and if they needed anything from her. They had a favor to ask, and she promised to help. Julia is always promising to help—in every realm, however she can.

Julia attributes her compassion, in part, to her early childhood in small-town Oklahoma.

“There was just such a strong sense of community and people caring about other people,” said Julia.

Her father had grown up in Carr Square near downtown St. Louis, which in the early 20th century was a tight-nit, thriving community. When the family eventually moved back to North St. Louis—into the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects—they found a changed city. But there was still a lot of pride and a deep sense of community.

“Ironically, moving from a small country town where we didn’t have indoor plumbing to Pruitt-Igoe was like moving to a New York City high rise... [as an adult] I chose to remain in North City, and I just want to see it restored to what it was years ago. People had so much pride and they loved where they lived.”
Julia’s earliest work in the community was with the Urban League—first in PR, and later in the housing department.

“When I saw there was an opening in their housing department, I knew that was something I wanted to do, because I was always fixing up the house that I lived in, as a single mother raising 5 children,” said Julia.

Another job soon opened up as a housing counselor with the Urban League, saving people from foreclosure through FHA provisions, and helping folks draw forbearance agreements if something happened that forced them to get behind in their mortgage. Julia felt close to that work—she said she identified with peoples’ struggles.

In 1994, Julia founded St. Louis Youth Build, an affiliate of Youth Build USA, and started on the path to becoming a sort of utility helper for the people of North St. Louis.

“The goal for me was to stop the school to prison pipeline... and to stop the decay of North St. Louis neighborhoods,” said Julia.

The roads to accomplishing those goals were many. For the past 26 years, she has instituted dozens of programs to help people of all ages, including financial security classes, a high school equivalency program, and the titular youth building program wherein young people learn construction skills that they can take into their communities to help rehab houses.

Julia’s programs are skill-focused, but her foremost intention is to provide a nurturing space for young St. Louisans, which she says they need above all else.

“It really pains me to see our young people not valuing life more, and I want to see that change. A lot of times, if we can help them get good jobs and get some skills so they can retain those jobs, they pull themselves out of poverty. That’s gratifying for me. They come into the program very broken and discouraged, and they leave with high hopes. Then they come back and tell their stories... I just want the young people to realize how much potential they have and all the opportunities that are available to them.”
“Megan Betts opened her interview by admitting that, though she is currently a full-time mom without a paying job, she has a little bit of trouble self-identifying as ‘just a homemaker.’ She proceeded to slowly reveal, over the course of the next 35 minutes, that she was involved in working with or founding six or seven separate community organizations in the past five years; she ran for public office twice in that time; and all the while she was working toward a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice, which she received from UMSL in August 2019.

As is true of many Promise Zone residents, Megan Betts’ story is not as unremarkable as she first let on.

Megan was born to a Mexican father and a young white mother but adopted at birth by a couple in Sublette, Kansas. Sublette is a town of around 1,200 residents in the sparsely populated Southwest corner of Kansas. Megan and her four siblings—one other of whom was also adopted—were raised Catholic, and as is common in the rural midwest, they were a traditionally conservative family.

“Although my beliefs are very different from my parents’ now, they did instill a sense of activism in us,” said Megan. “I see that I’m doing the things that I’m doing now because they instilled in me that ‘this is what you need to do to shed light on issues.’”
Megan moved away from Sublette when she graduated high school in 1997. She attended Kansas State University for two years, dropped out and worked for Sears for six years, and in 2005, she moved to St. Louis to be with the man who would later become her husband.

For her first eight years in St. Louis, Megan worked for banks in the Central West End and St. Louis Place. Many of her clientele were low-income, minority folks on social security, and her instructions were clear: get these people to open multiple checking accounts, multiple credit cards—push them further into debt, and in doing so, make more money for the bank.

“I didn’t want to do that, and I was written up many times,” said Megan. “Eventually I thought, ‘I should not be working here. I should be working at a non-profit.’”

She did eventually quit her bank job, and in 2015, Megan went back to school for an associates degree in criminal justice from St. Louis Community College. She and her husband were living in St. Louis Place at the time, and she soon became aware of her neighbors’ interest in the NGA campus proposal—they were protesting the displacement of their community and the inequitable development of North St. Louis land. One day, Megan decided to get involved.

“They were asking about, ‘How do we get our message out? How do we continue this work?’” said Megan. “I stepped in and said, ‘Hey, I’m one of the youngest ones here... There’s this thing called Facebook. There’s this thing called Twitter.’”

After that, Megan and her neighbors created the group Save Northside STL, and Megan became the media contact and go-to social media voice. That experience was the spark for Megan’s involvement in community work and led her down the path of being one of the founding members of Northside Neighbors United and Equitable STL.

“During that time I began immersing myself in community outreach,” said Megan. “I was at the board of Alderman meetings. I went to committee meetings. I just immersed myself in all these places and was able to keep showing up and making connections.”

Since then, Megan has graduated with associate and bachelors degrees, worked as a St. Louis ReCAST delegate, worked as a grant reviewer at Flourish, became president of the Gateway Elementary PTO, and was recently named to the board of the St. Louis Place, which she helped found in 2016. Anything but “just a homemaker,” Megan Betts has her hands in just about every community initiative in the Promise Zone.

NOW WITH EVERY INTENTION OF PURSUING A MASTERS DEGREE, MEGAN WILL ONLY CONTINUE COLLECTING RESPONSIBILITIES AND CONTRIBUTING HER VOICE TO THE PROMISE ZONE COMMUNITY.
Mary Chandler draws a distinction between her professional and extracurricular interests when she says, “None of the things I do have anything to do with each other,” but she is making moves as an NLF fellow to tie her many skills and interests into community work.

Mary got her real estate license in 2002. She has worked for the IRS since 2005. But she only really started engaging with the Promise Zone community in 2014.

Growing up in Normandy, Mary was always rooted in the Promise Zone, but when her grandma passed away in 2000, she felt like she had to create some distance between herself and those painful memories, so she moved to Denver, and later Atlanta, to be closer to the family and friends she had in those places.

She and her children finally moved back to her hometown in 2007 when she was hired for a full-time, permanent position with the IRS, after working with them seasonally for two years.

Those years of movement and job changes were incredibly formative for Mary. She learned a variety of skills in a variety of places, and by passing on those experiences, she wants to ensure that the people in her life have access to opportunities that she didn’t.
"I'm grateful for my job at the IRS because I learned so much about money and taxes and how to put your money in places with the least tax impact. So I try to use that knowledge, along with real estate knowledge, to figure out ways to do things for myself and my community, and also to pass down information to my children," said Mary. "If life is a race, I'm tired of every generation starting in the same place. I started at the starting line, but my kids shouldn't have to. I want to teach people how to get a head start."

Mary was living in Berkeley when Michael Brown was killed in 2014. That trauma, and the ensuing protests, made Mary reconsider her purpose in life. She wanted to refocus some of her time on contributing what she could to her community.

In 2016, when Mary picked up and moved again, this time just across town to The Ville neighborhood, she committed to bolstering her new community by attending some meetings for an organization called The Ville Collaborative. The Ville Collaborative is a group of about 20 stakeholders in The Ville community—churches, businesses, nonprofits—who come together once a month and discuss upcoming activities for residents to get involved in.

Next thing she knew, Mary was being approached by community leader Aaron Williams to co-chair the collaborative. That first ask was the impetus for everything she is doing and will do for the Promise Zone, including NLF.

"The idea was to give me a little bit more background on local politics—how things are done, how things are funded—and just learn about how a city is run to try to give me an understanding of where I fit in... I don't want to put my hands in too many baskets. I just want to find the one that fits me and do it well."
Audrey Ellerman was moved to tears as she remembered the following story of one of the many hundreds of patients whose life she impacted as a nurse in St. Louis:

At the time, she was in home care, visiting the home of a mother and father who would soon lose their son to renal failure. She remembered talking the father through his grief and helping the mother organize her son’s transfer to hospice care.

“What really got to me was when I was walking out, the mother just grabbed me, and held me, and thanked me,” she recalled tearfully. “That’s one that always stuck with me, and made me think, ‘wow, I did make a difference.’”

Even before she became a nurse, and since her retirement in 2017, Audrey has always cared for people. She says it was ingrained in her by her mom.

“Mama was a boy scout leader, taught Sunday school, volunteered at The Society of St. Vincent DePaul, A Catholic lay organization, through which she spearheaded a collection drive at her church for people to shop for clothes, food, or other items at low cost. She was always just willing to give.”
“I LIVED ALL OVER THE CITY, AND WHILE WE DIDN’T HAVE VERY EXCLUSIVE NEIGHBORHOODS, WE HAD NEIGHBORHOODS THAT PEOPLE TOOK CARE OF—WHERE THE PEOPLE LOOKED AFTER EACH OTHER.”

Having lived in many communities in St. Louis City—moving from parish to parish and neighborhood to neighborhood—throughout her childhood with her siblings and her mother and into adulthood, Audrey had myriad opportunities to witness positive community living: neighbors sharing and caring. These experiences instilled in her the strong sense of advocacy that she carries with her today.

When Audrey bought her first house in the Covenant Blu Grand Center neighborhood (CBGC) in 2001, she saw a place that needed care, and a community of neighbors who were determined to care for it. Now, nearly 20 years later, 40 new homes have been built in the area.

In her campaign for positive development in her community, she became involved in the Urban League-sponsored block unit program and later saw the need to expand the network by establishing the CBGC Neighborhood Association.

Audrey has made several proud contributions as a community advocate for CBGC, including her work organizing a debate for the 2019 aldermanic race in partnership with the Deaconess Foundation for Child Well-Being. That event gave Audrey an opportunity—as she formulated relevant questions to the candidates—to think about her representatives’ mindsets regarding leadership and best practices with regards to meeting the actual needs of the community. She is also in the midst of working with the Great Rivers Greenway Project and advocating for CBGC’s inclusion in the revised North Area Plan.

Presently, Audrey lives in her Covenant Blu Grand Center home, where she has been for 18 years—the longest she has ever lived in one place! Her caregiving skills as a nurse have come full circle, as she now cares for her mother and aunt, who are 95 and 97 years old. And she continues to care for her neighborhood, a place which would grab her, and hug her, and thank her for all the difference she has made there.
In a city defined by divisions, where there is a difference of nearly 35 years in the average life expectancy of two zip codes within five miles of each other, Delesha George says she is aware that her neighborhood, which borders one of the wealthiest zip codes in the City of St. Louis, benefits where others don’t—and that her family was much more fortunate than some.

“WE DIDN’T HAVE A LOT OF THE STRUGGLES THAT SOME FAMILIES HAVE, BUT MY GRANDMOTHER MADE SURE TO REMAIN HUMBLE AND TO MAKE IT UNDERSTOOD THAT THERE ARE THOSE WHO DON’T HAVE, AND WHEN YOU GIVE, YOU DON’T EXPECT IN RETURN AND DON’T LOOK BACK TO SEE WHAT THEY DO WITH WHAT YOU GAVE. YOU GIVE AND YOU MOVE FORWARD.”
DELESHA grew up in the Academy neighborhood. Formerly a part of the Central West End, Academy is bordered on the South by Delmar and on the West and East by Union and Kingshighway. It is a small and unusual pocket of the city, with as many private streets as vacant homes, and almost entirely black until recent years.

The George family is one of the many black families with a long legacy in the area. Delesha’s grandparents bought their house in Academy over 50 years ago and lived there until 1995. Delesha’s aunt and uncle then lived there until 2008. The house sat vacant for four years, still owned by the family, until Delesha and her daughter moved back to St. Louis from Washington D.C. in 2012.

In Washington D.C. Delesha worked for a variety of nonprofit agencies, first on the client side as a receptionist, then on the policy side with an agency that advocated for affordable housing in the D.C. area. As a receptionist, her exposure to clients from all walks of life cemented in her the desire to continue down the path of giving that her grandmother had paved.

Later, advocating for affordable housing, she developed an even more personal connection to the work. “The cost of living in D.C. is sky high, so that’s a dream for a lot of people—to own a house… These are hard-working people, educated people, oftentimes beyond high school, and they still can’t afford to buy a house. So that was something that really affected me, because during that time my daughter’s father and I were separated and I started to really look at life through the single-parent lens.”

Delesha remained in D.C. for five years before moving back to the neighborhood where she had grown up. In those first days back, she had a hard time convincing her daughter—and herself—that St. Louis would be their permanent home. Her daughter’s friends and father were thousands of miles away, and Delesha’s connection to the Academy had faded. But when she started volunteering for the United Way in 2015, her mindset began to change.

In her newfound quest to work for the good of her hometown, Delesha began as a volunteer at the United Way, reviewing applications for allocations from various area nonprofits. In that capacity, she went on site visits to dozens of agencies and began to reconnect to her community. As she learned more about the United Way, too, she became determined to someday work there. Every time a position opened up, she applied, until three years ago she finally accepted a full-time position. Now she is part of a team that manages a private family foundation and works every day to get a seat at more tables in St. Louis.

“I really want to be that person that has a relationship with the community and has connections within the community, but I also want to be on the other end of that and be at the tables and have a voice. Especially as a black woman, a seat at the table is not something easy to obtain. I’d really like to work with community organizations to know how to comfortably engage with donors… On some level, we can all relate with each other. I joined NLF so I could find new ways to relate with my community, and help other people discover the passion for St. Louis that my daughter and I have.”
Karen Greer’s passion for business started when she was just 11 years old.

“As a child, I worked with my mother at Frison’s Flea market as a vendor,” said Karen. “I got into business because I was inspired by my mom, wanted to control my own income and to make sure that I was available for my children when needed.”

Growing up, Karen’s family members sometimes ridiculed her for her assertiveness—for wanting to make a better life for herself. That did not stop her from pursuing her dreams.

“Mom and dad were my inspiration for being strong and independent,” said Karen. “Mom was the entrepreneur while dad was the structured parent with a savvy investment mindset.”

Inspired by her parents’ influence, Karen opened her own small business, Angels Within CDS LLC. Angels Within CDS LLC is a Home Health Care Company that provides in-home services to individuals who qualify through Missouri Medicaid.

“Our mission is to promote a person’s ability to live independently in their homes,” said Karen. “We work to help individuals meet their needs so that they can live in dignity and achieve their highest potential with greater freedom of choice through education and advocacy.”
Outside her professional work, Karen is also passionate and actively involved in serving the community in the 21st Ward and abroad.

"SOCIAL AND CIVIL INJUSTICES WERE NOT A TOPIC IN MY HOUSEHOLD GROWING UP AS A CHILD," SAID KAREN. "BUT I GAINED A PASSION FOR THEM AS I STARTED TO TAKE NOTE OF THE REPEATED, UNRESOLVED INJUSTICES AROUND ME."

While in college Karen began taking classes about civil law and became passionate about social injustices. Those courses fueled her desire to take action.

"After seeing the tragic murder of Michael Brown in 2014, I felt compelled to get involved because it could have been my son," said Karen. "I did not know exactly how at the time, or who to reach out to, but I knew I wanted to help."

Karen eventually found an avenue to action through the National Action Network.

"I assisted the National Action Network in helping the family with their needs and assisting to keep the friction down during the unrest between the police and the protesters," said Karen.

That first experience with helping the community during the civil unrest in Ferguson helped Karen learn more about civil rights and connecting with people to come together to reach a common goal. That new passion eventually led to her enrollment in NLF.

Karen has achieved many goals while working for herself and being actively involved in the community. In 2019 she was nominated and awarded the 21st Ward Business of the Year from Mayor Lyda Krewson.

"It was a surprise, and I was grateful to receive that recognition of being a business leader," said Karen. "Because of that award, I felt appreciated for being an asset in a thriving community. It motivated me to do more for and with the people."

IN THE FUTURE, KAREN PLANS TO OPEN A FARMERS MARKET WHERE RESIDENTS CAN SET UP AND SELL THEIR OWN FRESH PRODUCE TO OTHER RESIDENTS IN THE COMMUNITY ON TWO LOTS PURCHASED FROM THE LRA.

SHE HAS ALSO RECENTLY COLLABORATED WITH FELLOW 2020 NLF COHORT MEMBERS IN WORKING WITH YOUTH AND SENIORS IN TWO COMMUNITIES, AND HAS BECOME A PROUD BOARD MEMBER OF THE RUSTIC ROOTS SANCTUARY. SHE IS EXCITED FOR EVERYTHING TO COME.
Eltoreon Hawkins bought a piece of property in the Walnut Park Neighborhood in 2012, when he was a college student and father of one. The home cost him $1058 through the St. Louis Land Reutilization Authority (LRA). He spent an additional $2500 rehabbing the home, with the help of his uncles and an employee discount at Home Depot. For much less than most kids spend on their first car, "El" secured a 2-story brick home in the neighborhood where he was born and raised.

"If it was that easy for a first-time father, a freshman in college—I was broke and I had no time," said El. "So if it was that easy for me to buy a piece of property, why are there so many vacant houses? Why are there so many young adults who don’t have anywhere to stay? Why are there so many people on the streets?"

El was always aware of the problems in his neighborhood. He said violence and crime were common, drugs were common, but he never got into that life. He wanted to make a positive impact on his income and rise above the situation he was born into, but he didn’t want to take on the weight of impacting his entire neighborhood. That was too tall an order, until he bought his home.

“ONCE I BOUGHT MY HOUSE MY ENTIRE MINDSET CHANGED.,” SAID EL. “WHEN I BOUGHT THAT PIECE OF PROPERTY, I THOUGHT OF WALNUT PARK NEIGHBORHOOD AS A COMPANY. I BOUGHT A PIECE OF STOCK IN THAT COMPANY. WHEN YOU BUY A PIECE OF STOCK IN ANY COMPANY, YOU WANT TO KNOW THE FUTURE OF WHERE THE COMPANY IS GOING.”
So El started attending board of alderman meetings for the 27th ward. He started Googling property listings and learning about land ownership in the City of St. Louis. He started getting involved, buying more property, and people started taking notice.

"I became a part of a circle of people that was making decisions, and I didn’t even know it," said El. "Alderman Chris Carter noticed that I was in a position to start making positive changes in the neighborhood, and he started bringing me to more meetings."

Around that time, Eltoreon learned that the lot next to his home, which he had been caring for since he moved in, was actually a vacant lot still owned by the LRA. This realization, and his inclusion in city real estate circles, led to the genesis of the city’s Mow to Own program, and El became the first participant. Through this ‘sweat equity’ program, residents who cared for a vacant lot adjacent to their property for one mowing season (about two years), could be granted full ownership of that land at the end of the term.

El’s involvement with the Mow to Own program, and all of the attention he drew as the inaugural participant, pulled him even deeper into the St. Louis real estate and vacancy world. He joined the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations (SLACO) Vacancy Committee, and became enlightened on ‘how the effects of vacancy are way deeper than we see. We have a big part to play... There’s certain policies behind vacancy that need to be changed.’

El helped to form an LRA sub-committee of the SLACO Vacancy Committee, through which he learned that the largest issue was lack of education.

"It wasn’t that people didn’t want to buy vacant properties or that they weren’t able," said El. "They didn’t even know the LRA existed."

So the group began putting on workshops called the ‘Finest 15,’ where they picked the best 15 properties up for sale through the LRA, and encouraged local residents to purchase and rehab those properties. El personally researched every property to determine if they would advertise it.

"I physically went to each of those properties and determined, is this a house that I, as a single father and a working person, can complete renovations on?"

The Finest 15 workshop series exploded. The first workshop in Walnut Park had seven people in attendance. By the third workshop, there were over 160 people in attendance—standing room only. Ever since then, El has been on a roll. He joined the SLACO Executive Board, the Walnut Park West Neighborhood Association Executive Board, and The Vacancy Advisory Committee, but he recently resigned from all of those roles so he could focus on his family and himself, and think deeply about strategies for moving toward progress in the realm of vacancy.

"I SAID, ‘EL, YOU GOTTA START FOCUSING ON YOURSELF, BECAUSE IF YOU DON’T FOCUS ON YOURSELF, YOU AREN’T GOING TO BE IN A PLACE TO HELP OTHERS.’ BUT I ALWAYS WANT TO STAY ENGAGED... IF I GIVE UP, THEN I CAN’T BLAME THE PEOPLE BEHIND ME FOR GIVING UP."
Kristina Hazley has always been civic-minded, community-minded, concerned with helping others. “I’m always concerned about how others feel,” said Kristina, “and how they may feel left out.”

That concern comes through most strongly in her work with the Urban League Federation of Block Units (FBU), an auxiliary of the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis that was established in 1932 to bring a voice to the community of people within their blocks—to help them get information, to help them gather and make decisions about the needs of their block.

At one time the FBU had around 1000 active blocks in the City of St. Louis. Today that number is down to around 150. But even with their numbers dwindling and the average age of active participants rising, Kristina recognizes the importance of small, block-level representation in city council chambers, board rooms, and in the streets.

“We had a meeting with [Mayor Lyda Krewson] the other night, and one of the big talking points was our potential for impact during this pandemic. The Mayor said, ‘within your community you may have more of an influence and be able to make a more immediate impact than the people in positions of power.’”

The Federation of Block Units has been described as “the oldest, most recognized neighborhood self-help group in the city of St. Louis.” Kristina considers it her responsibility to make sure that she empowers active blocks with the initiatives of the Urban League—a civic organization that empowers residents within the community regarding their civil and socio-economic rights.

‘Whatever peoples’ needs are, I want to make sure that if they don’t know how to get them met, they can come to me,’ said Kristina.
Kristina’s concern for her neighbors also extends to her work in the Northwoods neighborhood, where she currently lives in the house that was once owned by her grandmother, and for which she hopes to someday become an Alderwoman.

Kristina says Northwoods is an older community, and her primary concern is drawing younger voices to her neighborhood and increasing community engagement.

“I’VE WATCHED HOMEOWNERS HERE OVER TIME WHO WERE ONCE VERY ACTIVE, THEY’VE GOTTEN OLDER AND MORE TIRED. I JUST WANT TO BE A LIGHT IN THE COMMUNITY TO BRING THEIR VOICES BACK AND THEIR CONCERNS TO THE FOREFRONT.”

Even outside of her civic work, Kristina is constantly concerned with providing her support to the people in her life who need it. Professionally, she is a front office worker at Hazelwood High School and member of the Hazelwood Federation of School Related Personnel, American Federation of Teachers Local 6050, Support Staff Union for Hazelwood School District Clerical Employees, of which she has been President, Secretary and now Treasurer, and through which she acts as a representative of the interests of her peers with the school board.

Kristina also worked in healthcare, as a home care nurse, for most of her life, and that’s how she ended up in Northwoods—she moved in with her grandmother when her health started declining, because she didn’t want to send her to a nursing home.

Kristina’s family was full of nurses, so maybe all this compassion is in her blood. She is from a family of faith, so maybe her caring concern is rooted in her upbringing.

Whatever the source, though, Kristina Hazley’s story is one of supporting and representing people, elevating their voices in everything she does.
When Kyle Lackey sees injustice, he commits to learning about it and fighting it. That’s what happened in 2014 when he was a student at St. Louis Community College’s Florissant Valley campus during the Ferguson uprising. He remembers attending a protest on West Florissant as a young student, pushing toward the front of the line, and feeling the energy shift. It wasn’t about violence or chaos at the front of that line: those people were in pain. They were speaking up about some very real issues—issues that Kyle wanted to learn more about.

“All I knew was that my community wasn’t as equitable as I expected and I couldn’t help but to wonder why. What’s leading to these disparities?”

Kyle wasn’t always so autodidactic, so driven to learn and act. He grew up with a diagnosed learning disorder, a mother who lives with schizophrenia, and an emotionally distant father. At home, Kyle’s parents lived paycheck-to-paycheck. At school, Kyle was made to feel different, often lesser, because of his learning disorder. He wanted nothing more than to be done with formal education and pull himself out of the systems that had made growing up so hard. Now, he’s earning his Master’s degree and committed to working in schools and toward the equitable distribution of resources for years to come.
That change of heart began in the STLCC system, and later at the University of Missouri - St. Louis, where Kyle began to get involved with on-campus diversity initiatives.

His first and most formative project was a district-wide STLCC fundraiser for the youth of Ferguson called Breaking the Boundaries: Spring Break Bash, which he led and organized, and through which he helped raise $1000 for area children who had been impacted by the uprisings.

“When I presented the check, that was the first time I realized I could accomplish what I had in my mind,” said Kyle. “I pictured something. I wanted to make a difference. And I executed it.”

Driven by that new sense of fulfillment, Kyle dove headfirst into the causes that mattered to him. As a member of the STLCC Diversity and Inclusion Council and the UMSL Chancellor’s Cultural Diversity and Strategic Planning Councils, he became one of the most visible young local leaders advocating for systems change in educational institutions.

“I SEE UMSL AND STLCC SERVING THE ST. LOUIS REGION, AND INCLUDED IN THAT IS THE ST. LOUIS PROMISE ZONE, SO IF I CAN HELP CREATE STRATEGIC POLICIES OR PROCEDURES THAT ARE APPROACHING THINGS THROUGH A STRATEGIC AND EQUITABLE LENS, EVERYBODY’S GOING TO BENEFIT.”

During Kyle’s NLF experience he was appointed to the St. Louis County Economic Rescue Team on the Community Development, Non-Profit & Alternative Lending Working Group. In this Working Group Kyle advocated for an equitable distribution of resources with a focus on distressed communities like the Promise Zone.

NOW AS A GRADUATE ASSISTANT IN THE UMSL OFFICE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION, A NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERSHIP FELLOW, AND A MASTERS CANDIDATE, KYLE IS COMMITTED TO COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN THE PROMISE ZONE AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS TO ADDRESS DEEPLY ROOTED DISPARITIES THAT PREVENT SOME FROM LIVING A PROSPEROUS LIFE.
Like many young civic leaders in St. Louis, the impetus for Trevaughn Latimer’s interest in racial equity was the killing of Michael Brown in 2014.

Being black and dealing with racial inequity was built into his childhood in Dellwood. He was seldom privileged with the time to think deeply about those issues as a child, because he was living them. But when Michael Brown was shot and his conversations at school started turning explicitly toward racial injustice and the inequitable history of the St. Louis region, his eyes were opened, and they couldn’t be closed.

“Of course I had known many people who had run-ins with the police. I had known many people who had turned to illicit activities in order to provide for their families. It was a thing that people just did,” said Trevaughn. “But looking back I now realize those shouldn’t be normal things. Those aren’t things that a community should have to do in order to survive.”

Going into college in 2015, Trevaughn became immersed in issues of racial injustice. In the Student Diversity and Multicultural Affairs dept. at Loyola University Chicago, listening to other peoples’ stories and sharing his story, things started to become more clear.
“I GOT TO A POINT WHERE I COULD NOT STOP THINKING ABOUT THIS: IF OUR POLITICAL SYSTEM IS SET UP IN A WAY THAT CAN BENEFIT ALL, WHY DON’T WE STRIVE FOR THAT? IT MAKES NO SENSE IN MY HEAD WHY THERE IS HOMELESSNESS. IT MAKES NO SENSE IN MY HEAD WHY THERE ARE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE IN POVERTY WHEN WE LIVE IN THE RICHEST COUNTRY IN THE WORLD. SO NOW I’M PURSUING A LIFE WHERE I CAN GET A SEAT AT THE TABLES WHERE WE MAKE DECISIONS ABOUT HOW OUR COMMUNITIES ARE RUN.”

Even though the Ferguson uprising fanned the fire under Trevaughn, his compassion and empathy was instilled in him from an early age by his mother, Dionna.

“Her whole life during my childhood was about her kids. She never focused on herself. She didn’t buy herself clothes. When we needed to eat and there wasn’t enough food, she wouldn’t eat. She was always looking toward the future and what it could be—what it was going to be. Whatever was happening, we were always going to get through it.”

With Dionna’s support, Trevaughn graduated college and came back home to serve his hometown as a Lead For America Fellow, a program that connects recent college graduates back to their hometowns to work in local government and community development work.

Since his graduation, Trevaughn has become the Community and Municipal Engagement Americorps VISTA at The St. Louis Promise Zone, a Forward through Ferguson Fellow, and the Chair of the Promise Zone Young Professionals Coalition. He has worked on community engagement efforts like the Promise Zone Library Box Program and development projects like the One West Florissant Redevelopment Project. He has taken on so many responsibilities in each of these roles, that they can’t be listed here. And through all of this experience he has gained an even clearer picture of his future—the future his mother always knew he’d have.

“The benefit of doing so many things is that you figure out what you like and what you don’t like. I like thinking about policy. I like engaging with the people in a community and seeing what they want to do in their community.”

Trevaughn just started his second year as an LFA fellow, and he is already thinking about what comes next: graduate school, global policy work, local community development... Whatever comes next, he, like his mother, will always be less concerned with the issues of today than the promise of tomorrow.
As the founder of GROW Spanish Lake and the Rustic Roots Sanctuary, Janett Lewis is constantly drawing from her eclectic past as she works for holistic healing in North County.

Janett grew up in Atlanta, but it was to her grandfather’s 163 acre plantation in rural Georgia, near Augusta, that she felt most connected. Her father had grown up on that farm, and that’s where she probably first came to love the outdoors—a love that propelled her toward a position at a Waldorf School in Georgia, "where everything revolves around nature."

From the Waldorf school, Janett moved to California to study and practice holistic medicine. At the time, inspired by an appreciation for massage therapy, her mission was "to travel around the world and learn different cultural modalities of body work." That mission took her from the Hawaiian islands, to Thailand, to a 35-ft sloop sailboat in Florida, and back to California, where she settled in San Diego.

All those myriad experiences compounded over a lifetime are made manifest in Janett’s two great passions today: an understanding of the healing power of nature, and a desire to do good.
WHEN JANETT FIRST PURCHASED PROPERTY IN SPANISH LAKE, SHE WAS WORKING AS A REAL ESTATE BROKER IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA. “I CAME HERE AS A BUSINESS DECISION... WHEN I GOT HERE, THERE WAS SO MUCH MORE TO ST. LOUIS THAN I EVER EXPECTED.” SO SHE DECIDED TO “STAY AND MAKE A CHANGE, BECAUSE IT’S TOO BEAUTIFUL AND THE PEOPLE ARE SO AMAZING.”

One of the ways in which Janett made an immediate impact on Spanish Lake was by purchasing the property next to her home, which had become a problem property in the neighborhood, and converting it into a Gateway Greening Network community garden.

After cementing herself as a neighborhood leader and caretaker through her efforts with the garden, she joined the Spanish Lake Community Development Corporation, of which she was recently named the chair of the board. In that capacity, she is working to revitalize the area through redevelopment efforts such as the Bellefontaine corridor study and supporting the new Zoo expansion moving into the old pipefitters’ union in Spanish Lake.

Most recently, Janett founded and acquired non-profit status for a 7-acre sustainable urban farm called the Rustic Roots Sanctuary, of which she is the acting President. Though the sanctuary was just finding its footing when COVID came around, Janett is optimistic that she can use this time to develop programs to touch on all of her passions—from sustainability to community development to youth engagement.

“What we want to do here is not only help make food for the community, but also teach sustainability. Next year we will launch a youth outreach program where troubled youths can come, and instead of going to detention or worse, they can get their hands in the dirt and start doing something productive. We also recently started a senior outreach program that helps feed people who are homebound.”

In each of her key roles in Spanish Lake, Janett Lewis is drawing from her lifetime of experience in, essentially, making people feel better.

“THAT HAS BECOME MY MISSION HERE: TO CREATE A HEALING SPACE IN SPANISH LAKE THAT BRINGS THE COMMUNITY TOGETHER AND GIVES ACCESS TO HEALTHY, FRESH FOODS.”
Catherine Morgan-Smith, President of the Academy/Sherman Park Neighborhood Association, has always been enamored with communities of people. It started in Pruitt-Igoe.

Catherine was born in the Pruitt-Igoe housing projects, which have been cast in a negative light over time, but which Catherine remembers as being a wonderful place to grow up. Pruitt-Igoe was demolished when she was five, and her family moved to the Darst-Webbe projects.

“My recollection is that the people who lived in Pruitt-Igoe, and later Darst-Webbe, really had a sense of community,” said Catherine. “My upbringing in the projects was all positive. I was so proud of growing up there, because I knew the families and I knew the people, and I knew that one family was always willing to help another family in need.”
That sense of community was strongest in Catherine’s own home, where her mom often cared for abused children and offered assistance to neighbors in bad situations. Their home was where people gathered, where kids came and went all day long, and where anyone was welcome.

“That sense of love for people, I got that from my mom,” said Catherine. “My fondest memory was of the amount of people in one small space, because I had all these friends. Living in that environment, and remaining in the City of St. Louis, helped develop me into the person I am.”

When Catherine became a professional auditor, her job had her traveling most weeks, which meant she couldn’t settle back down into the type of community she had fallen in love with as a child in the projects.

As she gained experience in her field, though, Catherine no longer had to travel so much for work, and she eventually bought a three-story home that needed work in the Academy/Sherman Park neighborhood, with the intention of investing in and settling into a new community. It took three years of rehab before she and her family could safely move into the home, and now ten years after purchase, she says they are about 98% finished with construction.

About a year and a half ago, Catherine was approached by the former president of the Academy/Sherman Park Neighborhood Association and asked to step in as president. “I thought, ‘Man, this would be a great opportunity for me to make all those changes I’ve been complaining about,’” said Catherine, with a smile. “When I finally accepted the offer I said to him, ‘I think I have some great ideas for the neighborhood to bring us together as one.’”

Since Catherine stepped in as president, the neighborhood association’s membership has gone from about five people attending the monthly meetings to 99 people attending a meeting just before COVID hit. Catherine, who works with numbers for a living, was quick to point out that was a “597% jump” in attendance. “Things like that really excite me, because it says that people really want to be involved. They really want to know what’s going on in their neighborhood. They really want to see the neighborhood do well.”

Though she has only held the position for about a year, Catherine has already established relationships with surrounding neighborhoods, organizations and nonprofit agencies. She has established committees for the neighborhood that cover projects ranging from beautification to safety and security. The social media committee has established social media pages, an Academy/Sherman Park website, and an active Next Door page. As she rattled off this list of accomplishments, Catherine was overflowing with pride—not in herself, but in her community—and hope for the future.

“I have a vision for the Academy to be a place where people can walk outside their doors and feel free,” said Catherine. “I have a vision of this neighborhood growing into something really wonderful.”
Alan Mueller's greatest strength as a neighborhood leader in Ferguson is his empathy. Above all else, in everything he does, Alan is interested in having "courageous conversations." He sees authentic dialogues as the pathway for deep understandings and, often, new friendships.

Shortly after Michael Brown, Jr.'s death "we started going to the predominantly African-American church just down the street that was at the center of the protests. We walked into that church not knowing what to expect and just started listening to peoples' stories..."

They went because Alan and his wife, Becky, were compelled to understand why there was so much pain in their community and why there was such an extreme reaction to Michael Brown's killing. They also wanted their presence to show that there were White people in Ferguson who were willing to listen and who cared.

The pastor at the church had two primary themes: "Do life together" - join together in strong community - and "Hold Up Your Corner." He taught that, as members of the community of humankind, we are compelled to do our part to help and heal our community. Alan responded to this call through listening, learning, engaging, and finally, through advocacy.
“I WENT TO TOWN HALLS, RACIAL EQUITY WORKSHOPS, THE READINGS ON RACE BOOK CLUB, AND MANY OTHER COMMUNITY EVENTS,” SAID ALAN. “I WANTED TO MEET PEOPLE, TO DEVELOP SOME KIND OF A RAPPORT. THIS IN TURN LED TO FRIENDSHIPS WHICH ALLOWED DEEP CONVERSATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE EVENTS THAT LED TO THE FERGUSON UNREST. THE BEST CONVERSATIONS ALWAYS COME FROM THE TRUST BUILT THROUGH FRIENDSHIPS.”

“Once I got started, it just snowballed... The amount of activism in this community is amazing, and the commitment of our residents is incredible,” said Alan. “I have learned so much from people I have met in the aftermath of the Unrest. I never would have met most of them without the community activism spurred on by the Unrest.”

Besides the church, much of the early understandings and friendships developed during conversations over Alan and Becky’s dining room table. They invited members of the community, sometimes with widely disparate views, to share in meals and conversations.

The need to “Hold Up Your Corner” drove Alan to help revive PROUD (People Reaching out for Unity and Diversity). The Mission of PROUD is “to sponsor opportunities that will encourage Ferguson residents to work together to build a community of harmony and equity, within a diverse group of people.”

PROUD provides settings so the community can listen, learn, and engage and take the new understandings and personal relationships to build a better community. PROUD holds regularly-scheduled Courageous Conversations on significant social, racial, and political issues. PROUD also sponsors panel discussions, workshops, and social gatherings to help bring our community together. PROUD strives to empower everyone to “Hold Up Their Corner” in their own turn.

Alan joined the Neighborhood Leadership Academy and later the Neighborhood Leadership Fellows to figure out how to best engage with a divided community as chairman of PROUD.

Alan believes in empathy, listening, dialog, and friendships as a way to bring the community of Ferguson together.
Reverend Dawn Price, founder and CEO of the Sophia Project, remembers the first workshop that she put on for teenage girls. In the early 2000s, when she was working as a youth pastor through the Regional Council of Churches, she was given a small grant to go into the community and design a program through which she could speak with minority teens about HIV.

She lit candles and a tall candelabra and had all of the nearly 50 girls in attendance gather in a circle. Then, because she’s “a poet before anything else,” she opened with a poem about self love and self hate, and asked each girl to react by telling the group something good about herself and something commonly misunderstood. By the end of the workshop, no one wanted to leave. They were captivated.

“That was when I knew that whatever programming I had, I would want to do it with teenage girls... It felt so good to create such a powerful workshop, but it felt humongously irresponsible to open people up but not give them a space where they could unpack those feelings and work through them. It stayed with me. So I formed the idea of what I wanted to do based on that. I’m going to create a safe space for girls to negotiate through adolescence,” said Dawn.

Eight years later, in 2011, the Sophia Project was born—a non-profit organization that serves young women from 11 - 21 years of age by providing in-school programming about self-efficacy and self worth.
"We ask principals, teachers, and counselors to identify students who have had difficulties—poor attendance, a history of suspensions, or kids who are flying under the radar because they’ve had a bit of trauma."

"WE FORM A COHORT OF THOSE GIRLS AND WE MAKE A PROMISE TO THEM THAT FROM THAT MOMENT ON, THE SOPHIA PROJECT IS GOING TO PROVIDE THEM WITH IN-SCHOOL SUPPORT, OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUPPORT, AND ONE-ON-ONE MENTORING UNTIL THEY GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL."

Now approaching their tenth year serving the community, the Sophia Project, under "Miss Dawn’s" direction, has graduated one cohort of girls every year since 2015. Dawn is proud of the sustained success of her organization, not only because she gets to see her graduates blossom into successful young women, but also because she feels like she is providing them with a form of support that she needed—that every girl needs—as a teen.

Growing up was an extremely hard ordeal for me... I had a very difficult time because I was a dark-skinned black girl, and there was a lot of colorism in my community. It made it hard for me to feel pretty and to find self-worth," said Dawn. "As a child or a teenager, we put so much weight on those things that we forget about the real priorities. I was always trying to find a trusting adult—someone that wasn’t my parent to talk about these experiences with."

Although she had to do a bit of searching, in the critical moments, Dawn did find generous men and women who were willing to guide her through adolescence, and for whom she is forever grateful. To close our conversation, she tearfully recalled one such man—former Superintendent of Schools in the School District of University City, Dr. Lynn Beckwith Jr.

"I remember one time I really wanted to go to a debutante ball, and I was a student rep to the school board, and the superintendent at the time paid for my dress. He said, ‘I hear that you want to be a debutante. I will pay for your dress. I will pay for your entry fees. If you want to be a debutante, I want you to be a debutante.’ I never forgot those things," said Dawn, holding back tears. "The pearling ceremony that the Sophia Project does for our girls where we give them a black dress and pearls for all the work that they’ve done for themselves—that’s Dr. Beckwith giving me my dress when I didn’t think I could have that, paying my entry fees when I didn’t think I had access to those things. That’s me reenacting those things for those kids. I’ll never forget that."

Likewise, the girls who go through the Sophia Project will never forget Miss Dawn.
Ebonie Reed, Esq. has always been self-driven and focused, introverted and self-assured. And though she prefers to work outside of the spotlight, when she does tell her story, she is the perfect positive example of success and charity for young folks in the Promise Zone. Ebonie was raised in Walnut Park and refused to let her upbringing dictate her success. She describes herself as having thrived in her own life.

“I’ve always had the personality that nothing defines me but me,” said Ebonie. “I’m not one who cares about societal norms and expectations. I know the expectation is, ‘Oh you grew up in this area, so how are you educated? How can you speak well? How did you make it through law school?’ So it’s shocking to some people that I got to where I’m at, which is disheartening.”

But anybody who has ever known Ebonie would not be remotely shocked by the success she has earned. “People who used to babysit me as a child, today they’ll say, ‘You’ve always been this way, even as a child.’”

After high school, Ebonie became a first-generation college student, but neither her nor her parents could fund this new journey, and she was very nearly forced to drop out. Fortunately, some mentors at her school took notice of her drive, and guided her through several scholarship applications, which led to her receiving financial support and admittance into the Honors College. With that little push, Ebonie worked twice as hard, picking up one full-time and two part-time jobs while attending college full-time to fulfill her financial and academic responsibilities; she ultimately graduated Magna Cum Laude.
“She comes to class. She does the work. She’s got the grades.’ They wouldn’t let a couple of dollars keep me from continuing. They didn’t have to do that. They didn’t know me... That’s what got me into mentoring other diverse students.”

After graduating college, Ebonie moved onto law school. She began her career in the private sector, and she is now a transactional lawyer doing pro-bono and non-profit work in the St. Louis region, which has allowed her to provide people in underserved communities with access to legal counsel—typically an expensive and unrealistic cost for people in a community with around a $30,000 median income.

In her work with various non-profits and minority subcontractors, Ebonie wants her clients to take solace in the fact that “they have someone who is willing to be their voice and to advocate, and knowing at the same time that they’re not potentially going to lose their business because they can’t afford to have an attorney at the table.”

Outside of her work, Ebonie is proud to mentor law students and young professionals who look like her, and to speak with young people in the Promise Zone about rising above society’s expectations of them.

“I’ve done a lot of making sure that people see other people that look like them,” said Ebonie. “I was raised in Walnut Park, so my goal is for them to understand that their neighborhood doesn’t define them. Their upbringing doesn’t define them. Their socio-economic status when they start off doesn’t define where they’re going to end, and that they, too, can either get a formal education or start their own business. When I’m speaking to students, they get excited when I say I’m from Walnut Park.”

Although she prefers to work behind-the-scenes most of the time, Ebonie does recognize how important it is for her to be a positive representative from her community—both Walnut Park, where she grew up, and her current home within the Promise Zone.

“I CHOOSE TO RESIDE IN THE PROMISE ZONE,” SAYS EBONIE.
“I THINK IT IS IMPORTANT FOR PEOPLE TO SEE A DIVERSITY OF BACKGROUNDS, EDUCATIONAL LEVELS AND PROFESSIONS WITHIN A COMMUNITY.”
Rev. Dr. Paulette Sankofa has lived a full and extraordinary life, and she’s not nearly finished. Five years ago—when Paulette was 64 years old and had completed a Bachelor’s degree, two Master’s degrees, a Doctorate in Critical Pedagogy, and post-graduate research at three separate universities, including a fellowship at the Washington University School of Medicine while she was living in a nearby homeless shelter—after all that learning and searching, Paulette settled into what would become her newest passion and the culmination of her life’s work: PEACE Weaving Wholeness, a Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) in North St. Louis.

“Peace, Education, Action, Compassion and Empowerment Weaving Wholeness,” the full name of the non-profit organization she founded in 2015, sponsors the Sankofa Culture and Art Wellness Village in the Old North neighborhood. The names are a mouthful, she admits, but having extensively researched peace and resilience in her life, Paulette needed to capture the complexity of her mission.
The idea is that it takes a lot of different components for a person to experience wholeness within themselves. Our mission is to help women and men heal and remain whole, by connecting adults ages 60+ with resources and programs to reduce social isolation, and by promoting aging in place.

The idea of NORCs, founded in diverse cultural traditions of communities caring for their elders, always reminded Paulette of what it was like growing up in the West End—a community where people were really interconnected, where seniors could age in place. The seniors in Paulette’s neighborhood were her best teachers and friends.

“I’VE ALWAYS HAD A PASSION FOR SENIORS, EVEN WHEN I WAS A LITTLE KID,” SAID PAULETTE. “I SPENT MOST OF MY TIME WHEN I WASN’T IN AN ALLEY PLAYING BALL SITTING WITH A SENIOR AND LISTENING TO THEM TELL STORIES, BECAUSE THERE WERE A LOT OF PEOPLE IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD INVOLVED IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT,” INCLUDING HER MOTHER AND FATHER, WHO WERE BOTH UNION ORGANIZERS AND ARDENT ACTIVISTS.

Though she grew up at the height of white flight and American racial unrest, Paulette remembers her childhood fondly. She remembers her mother’s dried orange peel and sassafras tea, but also her father taking her to marches, sitting her at the Woolworth’s counter while people spat at them.

“He wanted me to have a really good understanding of what he and his friends were protesting against... I was always told that I was equal to everybody but I was better than no-one. I grew up seeing black doctors, lawyers, preachers, teachers, janitors—everybody was in there together.” Paulette’s family encouraged her to be adventurous and independent, to do whatever she wanted to do.

“All hell would break out when somebody told me I couldn’t do something—that I wasn’t capable or that I wasn’t allowed,” said Paulette with a smile. So she traveled the country, often leaving her belongings behind, in a constant quest to broaden her mind and remain engaged with the world.

When she finally returned to St. Louis in 2014, she went into her “graduate studies in the shelter,” traveling back and forth from a homeless shelter to the Wash. U. Med School, and conducting “The New Face of Homelessness,” a Community Research Fellows Training program project.

Paulette then moved to Old North St. Louis and founded PEACE Weaving Wholeness, which began as one discussion group of women sharing sisterhood and a meal, and has since ballooned into a NORC with paid employees, a number of volunteers, and a collaboration with the Washington University Program in Occupational Therapy.

“I wanted this program to be something my mother and father would be proud of, something my seniors can be proud of. I wanted to empower these seniors to take initiative in their own lives... and I wanted it to be in the city, where seniors don’t always get these kinds of opportunities.”
SHAVANNA SPRATT
St. Louis County - Ferguson

While Shavanna Spratt sat on a Zoom call sharing the story of her work and passion in the community, her two-year-old daughter Davaeh sang and played somewhere off screen. It was fitting, then, that Shavanna’s opening line was:

“I’M WHAT I’D CALL AN AVERAGE, EVERY DAY PERSON. RIGHT NOW I REALLY FOCUS ON BEING A MOM, BUT MOTHERHOOD HAS DRIVEN ME TO BE MORE INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY.”

Davaeh interjected every few minutes with a song or a yelp or a giggle, and Shavanna always smiled at her first daughter out of the corner of her eye. At one point, Davaeh asked for a toy. Shavanna handed it to her and said, “Are you happy?”

“Happy!” Davaeh responded.

These little interactions are proof of Shavanna’s passion for motherhood and dedication to babies. She is the woman you want representing your community’s pregnant women and mothers.
Shavanna is a certified doula, member of the Community Leadership Cabinet at Flourish, and spokeswoman for mothers in the St. Louis Promise Zone. Her passion for “sticking up for moms and babies” arose from her personal struggles with pregnancy. Before Davaeh was born, Shavanna had a miscarriage. That experience was heartbreaking, and ultimately, formative.

Later, when she was pregnant with Davaeh, some different issues arose. She didn’t appreciate how she was treated at the hospital and during doctors visits leading up to the delivery. She didn’t feel like her thoughts and feelings were being taken into consideration. She felt like she was just another case being rushed out the door, which was particularly troubling, because Shavanna has a blood clot issue that puts her at a heightened risk for complications during pregnancy.

“After my pregnancy with Devaeh I fell into a post-partum depression,” said Shavanna. “Going through that and not knowing what I was going through, and then finding the Jamaa Birth Village—who I highly recommend for a lot of African American women—it helped me educate myself on childbirth. Through them I learned I’m not alone, I am supported, and I can speak up for myself.”

“Once I started speaking up for myself, I wanted other moms to know that they could speak up for themselves... A lot of times as a black woman, you speak about how you’re feeling, and it’s not taken seriously. You feel like you don’t have a say.” Shavanna was born in St. Louis County to a drug-addicted father—now clean—and a single mother on welfare. For most of her life, she did not feel like she had a voice in her community.

“GROWING UP, I NEVER FELT EMPOWERED, I NEVER FELT LIKE MY VOICE MATTERED, SO I NEVER CONSIDERED ADVOCACY WORK. I NEVER HAD ANYONE TELL ME, ‘YOU CAN MAKE DECISIONS THAT ARE IMPORTANT AND YOUR OPINION MATTERS.’”

Shavanna wants to make sure no one in her community ever feels like that again. As she works with Flourish to bring more resources to the community, she also has some advice for all pregnant mothers: get a doula and watch the documentary “The Business of Being Born.”

“During childbirth you are focused on bringing a healthy baby into this world and sometimes it’s difficult to speak up for yourself in that process, a doula can be a support,” said Shavanna. “Sometimes you need an advocate. Sometimes you need a reminder that your voice matters,” she yelled, with a smile on her face.

In the background, Davaeh laughed, and it was clear that Shavanna Spratt is not just an “average, every day person.” She is an extraordinary mother and neighborhood leader—one who someday hopes to represent her community as an elected official.

“I believe we need more everyday people sitting in those decision making seats,” said Shavanna. “We need more diversity. The representation should definitely reflect the community. I hope sharing my story helps others find their voice, and through my work past and present, I hope to inspire the next generation to get more involved in their communities.”
Toni Stovall is a lifelong learner. She is always learning more about social work as she works toward getting her MSW from the University of Missouri - St. Louis. She is always learning more about herself, about what exactly she wants to do with her life moving forward. But one thing she learned a long time ago is that, however vague, this truth is central to her life:

“As long as I’m helping people, I’ll be fine.”

Toni recognizes that her’s is a standard response from a social worker, but she wholeheartedly believes it when she says it.

“What’s the purpose of life if you’re not helping people?” asked Toni. “I grew up as a Christian. Then I was at risk in a population that really needed to be served. If it wasn’t for people who had the hearts to serve, to give back and help other people, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I want to pay it forward.”
Although she seems open to service in any form, Toni has narrowed in on a few different passions within her field, each of which she feels a strong personal connection to.

She has always been good with numbers and remembers a financial social work class she took some time ago. Financial social workers, basically, teach people about budgeting and how to manage their money—they encourage “financial empowerment,” as Toni likes to say. She was struck by the importance of that work, and by the universal need for it.

“NO MATTER WHO YOU ARE, WHETHER YOU HAVE A LITTLE OR A LOT, YOU HAVE TO DEAL WITH MONEY,” SAID TONI. “I THINK IF YOU LEARN HOW TO MANAGE IT RIGHT, IT CAN SET YOU UP FOR SUCCESS.”

Toni’s other passion within her field is working with teen moms. Toni became pregnant with her son when she was 15 and gave birth at 16. She remembers feeling discouraged and outcast at that time, and she doesn’t want other young mothers to feel that way.

“I WANT TO LET OTHER TEEN MOMS KNOW THAT THEY DON’T HAVE TO BE A PRODUCT OF THEIR ENVIRONMENT,” SAID TONI. “I WANT FOR THEM TO BE BETTER THAN WHAT THE STATISTICS MAY SAY. A LOT OF PEOPLE PROBABLY THOUGHT THE ODDS WERE AGAINST ME. ‘SHE’S NOT GOING TO FINISH SCHOOL. SHE’S NOT GOING TO DO ANYTHING WITH HER LIFE.’ I WANT TO ENCOURAGE OTHER TEEN MOMS AND LET THEM KNOW THEY DON’T HAVE TO LISTEN TO THE NAYSAYERS.”

Toni’s compassionate heart may have, in part, been nurtured by her strong faith. She grew up going to the St. Louis Dream Center, a church and outreach center of Joyce Meyer Ministries near O’Fallon Park in the Promise Zone. The Dream Center was a safe and fun space for her and her friends to learn about God, and Toni credits all of the volunteers and youth pastors there with forming her into the faith-filled person she became.

She also credits her mother, who she describes as sweet and pure and loving.

“She is definitely a true inspiration, a true role model,” said Toni. “She’s not the parent that’s telling you to do the right thing, she’s the parent that’s doing the right thing.”

Wherever it comes from, Toni’s sense of compassion is tangible, and wherever she ends up, the people she encounters will learn to be a little more compassionate from her.
"Graphic design is much more than just the visual process—it is concerned with how systems are designed as well."

These are the words of Quinton Ward, the young Executive Director of the St. Louis Metro Market, who graduated from Webster University with a degree in Graphic Design in 2018. Quinton sees everything in terms of design, and has no trouble connecting his fine arts background to the varied work he is doing in the community today.

“Everything we do, everything around us, is by design. The communities that we see that don’t have certain services, the way that certain parts of our community are built, the way that laws and policies are put in place—that was all designed. Those designs were created by someone, and they can be changed to make things more equitable.”

This idea of the omnipresence of design was introduced to Quinton by Antoinette Caroll, the founder of the Creative Reaction Lab (CRL). Quinton’s senior year of college, he became a Katherine Dunham fellow through the Art Education Counsel. As it turned out, Antoinette was the first ever Katherine Dunham fellow, and it was through that connection that Quinton developed a strong relationship with CRL.
Quinton joined CRL’s Community Design Apprenticeship Program that same year and began work on the Mobility For All, By All project—a study on potentially designing an extension of the St. Louis MetroLink farther North and South.

“That’s when everything started to click,” said Quinton. “I said, ‘Oh man, if I can be on a Metro project, I can be on a climate change project. I can work on social systems. I can do anything.’”

Since then, he has done a little bit of everything. His first real opportunity in the civic sphere, at least professionally, was as an Americorps VISTA with the St. Louis Zoo right after college.

“My job was to be the liaison for the community, to make sure the community’s voice was being heard, that we were getting diverse and equitable feedback from the community with regard to what they would like to see from the new Zoo campus in North County. That expansion is moving into Spanish Lake, which made the work extra personal for me, because that’s where I grew up:’

Spanish Lake is a truly diverse community at the northeastern edge of St. Louis county. Homes with large lush yards sit blocks away from vacant properties in food deserts. Quinton grew up with the former—in touch with nature and art—and so he felt out of touch with the parts of his community that were under-resourced and under-served.

“At one point I thought, ‘Why is it that even on a sunny day, Spanish Lake feels so gray?’ I had no actual relationship with the parts of Spanish Lake that were in need of services. So I became more engaged with Spanish Lake as a whole—working with Youth on the Rise, going to town hall meetings or Spanish Lake CDC meetings—because I wanted to understand, though my experience might not be reflective of the majority, how do I make sure that I am informed and empathetic and mindful of what’s going on around me. Now I have a really deep passion for Spanish Lake. I tell everyone I’m from Spanish Lake.”

One of the things that pushed Quinton to become more engaged with his community was his close relationship to his grandmother, who has been deeply involved in social services and community work for her entire life. “It’s just in her,” said Quinton. “She couldn’t sit down if she wanted to.”

Once Quinton started standing up for his community, he didn’t sit down either. He began volunteering for the St. Louis Metro Market—a former Metro bus turned mobile grocer that serves parts of the Promise Zone, including Spanish Lake—and on and off a couple years ago. On February 3, 2020, he was named the Executive Director, and in that role too, he is applying his mind for design to the good work. He wants to change the model for food distribution in food deserts. In the pandemic, Metro Market started preparing free, pre-boxed groceries. Quinton said the first time he saw those groceries finished and distributed, “It was like a finished work of art.”

“THIS IS HOW I VIEW MYSELF A LOT OF THE TIME: I AM AN ARTIST IN A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION. WHEN PEOPLE ASK WHAT I DO, I DON’T NECESSARILY SAY I’M AN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, BECAUSE I THINK THAT’S ONLY ONE PART OF IT. ANOTHER LARGE PART OF IT IS BEING AN ARTIST. THIS IDEA THAT ARTISTS CAN’T LEAD ORGANIZATIONS—DON’T BELIEVE IT.”
Sundy Whiteside is a woman with many passions, each of which she could eloquently and intelligently discuss for hours. With a Bachelor’s degree in Electrical Engineering from the Missouri University of Science and Technology, she is happy to discuss silicon, programmable logic controllers (PLCs), and her background in manufacturing. She is also a licensed realtor in the state of Missouri and operates two businesses, a consulting company called Equitable Development Strategies (EDS) and a company called Homeownership for All. As a concerned, lifetime citizen of North St. Louis she loves talking about improving St. Louis neighborhoods and community development projects, like the Northside Regeneration Project and the New NGA campus. But above all else, Sundy is passionate and vocal about one thing these days—vacancy.

“In our neighborhood, I think vacancy is the number one problem,” said Sundy. “I think it’s heavily connected to the increase in crime and everything else that’s going on, because when you walk outside and you see all of the unsafe dilapidated buildings, you begin to feel as if you live in a war-torn area. People start to feel like things are life or death and three questions emerge: Don’t we deserve better? Isn’t our community worth more? Why should we care about our neighborhood? These feelings then give birth to destructive behaviors, a lost sense of pride, and complete hopelessness.”
Sundy was born and raised in the Walnut Park neighborhood in the Promise Zone, and as with most of the vested interests in her life, she has maintained a strong passion for the place she grew up—so much so that she helped found the Walnut Park East Neighborhood Association in 2015.

When the neighborhood association was started, Sundy and the other members decided that their top priority would be neighborhood cleanup, so they started a campaign called Keeping it Clean (KIC). The first KIC event was a rousing success.

“We had about 200 participants. Mayor Francis Slay and all the city departments came out. It really motivated the residents, and it gave everyone hope that if we work together we can bring about change, and we’ve got people who are interested in helping us change our neighborhood,” said Sundy.

Around that time, Sundy started to get involved with the St. Louis Association of Community Organizations (SLACO). In January 2016, when SLACO held its first Vacancy Committee meeting, Sundy became impassioned by the problem of vacancy, and suggested to the Walnut Park East Neighborhood Association that she, as the neighborhood association’s SLACO representative, switch over from a focus on cleanup to a focus on vacancy work with SLACO.

Later on, Sundy and her colleagues at SLACO were approached by former mayor Vincent C. Schoemehl to co-sponsor Proposition Neighborhood Stabilization (Prop NS), which would raise money to stabilize vacant properties in North St. Louis. After she earned her seat at that table, she was always careful about whose interests she was representing and whether she was doing so authentically.

“(SLACO) wants to be clear about what we want for the people,” said Sundy. “We want to make it understood at the table that we’re with them to try to get things done, but we want things done a certain way, with the peoples’ interests in mind. We want transparency. We want citizen oversight committees. We want progress reports. And more than anything else, We want equity.”

Sundy’s passion and intelligence have earned her many spots at many tables—including former Mayor Francis Slay’s TIFF Commission, and her current positions as Co-Chair of the St. Louis Vacancy Collaborative and Board President of SLACO—and in each of those roles at each of those tables, as she gains more knowledge and momentum, she continues to put pressure on people to make their communities better.
As the Youth Programs Coordinator at Beyond Housing’s Pagedale Family Support Center, Alice Wilson is known as Miss Alice.

“That is my identity more-so than my title,” said Alice. “I see the students every day. I greet them when they come in. I check their schedules, make them wash their hands, watch them get their homework out... I’m like a second mom at the program.”

Wilson didn’t always plan to work with children, and her path to coordinator of a program intended to cultivate a love of reading without teaching the mechanics of reading was an untraditional one.

In elementary school, Alice didn’t like reading aloud. She would read ahead at her desk and practice the sentences she’d have to read before the teacher got to her. There was a stigma around intelligence and an anxiety associated with public speaking, so she avoided it.

After high school, Alice began volunteering with Beyond Housing’s after school program while she studied deaf communications and sign language interpretation at Florissant Valley Community College. She remembers one afternoon in 2006 at Beyond After School when the teacher asked her to read aloud to the kids. The book was “Knockin’ on Wood,” about a peg-legged tap dancer, and Alice had a background in tap, so she tapped along with this story as she read aloud. She saw the joy in the kids’ faces and felt a change within herself. This was a place where reading was about stories, not abilities, and where kids of all levels could feel encouraged and supported.
Alice continued volunteering with Beyond After School until she was hired in 2010. She quickly rose from summer teacher to site assistant to Youth Programs Coordinator, and the trajectory of her life was changed forever.

“I have learned so much, I have grown so much from their program. I did not decide to do this, it really came and grabbed me.”

Now in her tenth year as an employee with Beyond After School and over twenty serving in their after school programs, including the Children’s Defense Fund Freedom Schools program, Alice has seen the tangible impact of her work in the development of the children she has taught; two of the staff members at the after school program are former students, who Alice met when they were in middle school. They wanted to come back and give other kids what the program gave them—what Miss Alice gave them.

“Educators are celebrities. Kids who have gone through the program will find me everywhere. I remember them, and to be able to pull those memories up, it lights them up,” said Alice. “It’s all about them. I love them.”

Alongside her work with Beyond Housing, Alice now serves as an After School Ambassador with the Missouri After Schools Network. In that capacity, her goal is to share stories with legislators and advocate for funding for afterschool programs, which have become her unexpected passion.

Remembering her first visit to Washington as an ambassador, Alice said she expected curt conversations with uninterested politicians. Instead, she found a city full of former students, each of whom had their own Miss Alice that had helped them get to where they were, and that was all the proof she needed that she’d found a perfect way to make a difference in her community.
Mike Woods, Co-Founder of Dream Builders 4 Equity (DB4E); Founder of Connected St. Louis; certified personal trainer; entrepreneur; published author; and St. Louis real estate investor. “That’s what I want our young people to get from everything that we’re doing in the organizations that I’m participating in. You can be loved and admired in the same light as an athlete or entertainer by being selfless and fighting for change.”

Though young, Mike has lived a full and complex life. He works tirelessly, and his output is prolific. He owns multiple properties in St. Louis. He has published three books of poetry and one children’s book on making wise decisions. Through Connected St. Louis Michael has hosted nearly 30 events for black-owned brick and mortar businesses and generated 10s of thousands of dollars for their owners. And through Dream Builders 4 Equity he has given over 40 young St. Louisans employment, equity in real estate properties, and the opportunity to take ownership over their narratives, just as he did.
Mike has always lived in neighborhoods in the Promise Zone that he characterized as “pretty tough”—from Moline Acres to Walnut Park to Hyde Park. In that community—in spite of the “amazing, hero-like” sisters, parents, and mentors he had to look up to—he found himself still trying to fit in with the “tough guys” around him.

When Mike was in high school, he went from star athlete and honor roll student—fresh off of a state title in basketball—to being expelled for selling drugs.

“At that school, at that time, everyone knew exactly what I was doing and no one ever said stop,” said Mike. “I was told by the detective that they watched me for over a year but I was never approached until the day after the state championship, and that first conversation was to expel me. No one ever tried to turn my life around. No one tried to have that conversation with me. They all smiled. They all loved me. They all cheered me on.”

Mike’s life changed after that experience, but not necessarily for the worse. He moved to Chicago, went to alternative schools, and turned his life around.

“I knew I didn’t want other young people to go through the same thing. The students we work with at Dream Builders are coming from similar neighborhoods and backgrounds. When we see them slipping we immediately address it and provide alternative routes for them to take. Neal and I are living proof that anything is possible. We see ourselves in our youth and they see themselves in us.”

One of the reasons Dream Builders 4 Equity is so effective at what they do, said Mike, is because they don’t just sympathize with young people when they share a tough moment—they don’t just feel sorry for them. They empathize.

“We not only say I’m sorry you are going through this, but hey I’ve been through it too and this is how I got through it,” said Mike.

When they founded DB4E in 2016, Mike and co-founder Neal Richardson started by giving about 10 kids the opportunity to rehab vacant homes in North St. Louis. They paid the students $10/hour and gave them a portion of the profits when the home was sold, in the form of academic scholarships.

Since then, they have expanded their work to include an emphasis on storytelling and entrepreneurship. The youth have published three books and they host a book signing and poetry slam at the end of each DB4E term. They’ve also expanded their network to include more schools in the area, with one caveat—they always want to focus their work in St. Louis city, because Mike and Neal know those kids have a particular story, an important story.

“Storytelling is everything. We know that our story is unique. We know that when the students get an opportunity to share their stories, there’s no way you can deny the effectiveness of the work.”
A Ted Gatlin Jr. had a mantra: 
“YOUR SEAT AIN’T SAFE.”

Pointed at publicly elected officials, Ted’s mantra served as a reminder of the very nature of our democracy. “That’s not your seat; that’s the peoples’ seat,” he says, “and we allow you to be there.”

Ted first became concerned with civic engagement when he began working for the Children’s Defense Fund in 2008, running their St. Louis Freedom Schools program. In 2009, he moved to Louisville, KY, where he got involved with the Urban League as a young professional. In that capacity, he advocated for civilians to have a better understanding of local political systems, in part because he recognized that some politicians were taking advantage of voters’ lack of knowledge when it came to the political process.

“My mother used to tell me she really doesn’t like when people take advantage of other folks,” said Ted. “Some politicians take advantage of folks not knowing... They want to keep people in the dark. You should look for more opportunities to educate people. You should want educated people to support you.”

With his mother’s words as motivation, Ted branched out into every corner of the political world. He helped organize an open mic debate series in Kentucky, where citizens could question and challenge the people on their local ballots. He worked on political campaigns and hosted FM radio shows, always leveraging his skills and learning new ones.

When he moved back to St. Louis, Ted started his own consulting firm, Unlimited Results: Experiential Training and Development, through which he took speaking engagements and taught folks how to do the best possible job working with youth.

He also hosted his own podcast, Life on Wax with Ted Jr., where he invited people who inspired him to talk about music, politics, and activism. Then he wrote his own Medium articles on every episode. Ted was a renaissance man—a multi-talented, inherently motivated millennial content creator, advocate, and activist with a long laundry list of projects—but echoing through all of his interests were those four words: “Your seat ain’t safe.” Ted Gatlin Jr.’s mission was specific, as was his impact.

“When it comes down to being involved in politics and civic engagement, you don’t need to ask anybody’s permission.”

T E D G A T L I N J R.

St. Louis County - Jennings

Ted passed away on July 12, 2020. He will be remembered throughout the St. Louis Promise Zone as one of the most dedicated, charismatic, and well-rounded leaders in the community.
Neighborhood Leadership Fellows is an advanced leadership training program of UMSL, MU Extension and the St. Louis Promise Zone-St. Louis Economic Development Partnership.

Individuals selected to participate in Neighborhood Leadership Fellows receive a stipend, UMSL Chancellor’s Certificate in Civic Leadership, complete a personal leadership plan and work in groups to develop opportunities to aimed at addressing more equitable regional policies within the St. Louis Promise Zone.

PROJECT TITLES

• "Having Peace and Quiet: An Equity Issue" - Advocating for enforcement of current nuisance noise ordinances, and requirement of stiffer penalties for bars, restaurants, and unlawful gatherings.

• "Refund $TL" - Advocating and educating on what it means to Defund the Police & Refund the Community

• "I am Tomorrow's Promise" Dismantling the Divide - Advocating for real estate professionals to receive training on effects of redlining & educating on benefits of home ownership within the Promise Zone

• "For the Sake of All" School Based Health Centers - Advocating for sustained funding for School Based Health Centers

• "Creating the Whole Child" - Advocating for schools to support the whole child by providing opportunities and provisions that children need in order to thrive academically, socially and emotionally

2020 NEIGHBORHOOD LEADERSHIP FELLOWS

FACILITATION TEAM

• CLAIRE RIPPEL
• DWAYNE T. JAMES, PE
• TASNIM HAQ
• AUSTIN DIAL

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