

# VOICES OF OUR COMMUNITY

*Following the death of George Floyd and the nationwide and local Black Lives Matter protests, we asked several members of our Harrisburg community if they would like to share their personal stories.*

**A**t any given moment, while sleeping in the privacy of my own home, like Breonna Taylor, while failing to signal a lane change while driving, like Sandra Bland, or while walking down a Chicago street, like Frankie Ann Perkins, I could become the next hashtag #SayHerName.

Black lives matter ALL WAYS and ALWAYS. Everyone has a critical role to play. We must put our energy behind efforts that will make an immediate impact within the City of Harrisburg. Here are a few ways that will yield immediate results.

**Vote.** Elect candidates whose values align with your own. Politics are the heart of the local community. Every day, you are impacted by political decisions, decisions related to access to quality healthcare, education, childcare, housing and jobs. Be a part of the solutions to ensure your basic needs are fulfilled. Vote like your life depends on it, because it does.

**Complete the Census.** Census participation will provide federal funding for public transit, early childhood education, school lunches, senior housing and public safety programs. By completing the census, the City of Harrisburg can receive federal funding for programs supporting our most vulnerable residents—our senior citizens and children over the next decade.

**Actively engage in City Council meetings.** City Council meetings are held every Tuesday. You have an opportunity to participate in the meeting by offering public comment on a bill or resolution on the meeting agenda. You may also offer public comment on any other matter of interest within the city. Public comments become a part of the formal meeting record. Hold us, your local elected officials accountable.

**Progress requires effort.** The Black Lives Matter protests are a step toward achieving progress. The protests successfully engaged the youth, the old, Black, Brown and white people to march for a cause greater than themselves. While some are marching in the streets, others are raising their voices to achieve progress by engaging their elected officials through phone calls and e-mails. Know that all efforts are seen and heard.

Many of our non-Black colleagues are interested in continuing to make a difference beyond the protests. Our colleagues have been strong allies, showing up and supporting Black and Brown people. We need accomplices. Accomplices will assist in dismantling



the oppressive structures impeding the progress of the Black and Brown marginalized communities without fear of consequences. No progress will be made until those with perceived power will recognize our value in all spaces we occupy. We bring a perspective that must be at every table to truly effectuate change. Be brave, become an accomplice. Break down barriers. Change the board rooms, workplaces; include us wherever decisions are made. Equality should be everyone's fight.

Black lives matter ALL WAYS and ALWAYS. Every day, Black men and women have an influence on our lives. The traffic light, mailbox, dustpan, clock, almanac and ironing board are just a few inventions that were developed by brilliant Black men and

women. Let's not forget the Black urban planner who surveyed the land off of the Potomac River that would become our nation's capital, Washington, D.C.

Viola Davis recently shared a post that resonated with me. Viola stated, "A revolution has many lanes—be kind to yourself and to others who are traveling in the same direction." Our tactics may have us in different lanes, but know we are traveling in the same direction. Let's improve our city together for future generations to thrive and prosper. Say Her Name, Say Their Names, Black Lives Matter ALL WAYS and ALWAYS.

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*Danielle L. Bowers is a member of Harrisburg City Council.*



Growing up in central PA, I was raised by a single mom after my dad passed away.

During my childhood, I had positive interactions with our local police department through their focused community policing efforts. I believe their efforts helped shaped my young view of policing. I did have to counter that, however, with a culture that spoke of doubts in trusting the police. I had “the talk” with my mother and uncles about how to “act” around police and white people. I was told multiple times about implicit bias and how that might shape my interactions with people, but especially those who are white. I may encounter things my friends may not just because of something I could not control, my skin color. The stark reality is that not all men are treated equal in a land where it is proclaimed that all are created equal.

When I attended a midstate college as a student, I had another experience. I was driving back to campus on a Sunday night around 9 p.m. I noticed, in my side mirror, red and blue lights. I wasn’t speeding, so I kept driving, thinking that the car was going around me. I realized quickly that I was being pulled over. The officer approached my window and asked for information. I gave it to him and asked him why I was being stopped tonight. He didn’t answer but instead began questioning me.

“Where are you coming from?” “It’s late, what brings you to the area?”

He then asked where was I going. When I answered that I was going back to college, he gave me a look that said he didn’t believe me. The next few words he spoke cemented my thoughts that I was trying to keep back. When I told him what college I attended, he sarcastically said, “Oh yeah, really?”

In my mind, everything my family and culture had ever told me about driving while black became real in that moment. I was scared. I thought, “How I can get out of here?”

I quickly blurted out, “Can I give you my student ID?” With my hands shaking, I found my school ID and handed it to the officer. He looked at the ID, looked at me, went back to his car, ran my information, came back and returned it back to me and told me to have a good night. He went to his car, turned off his lights and pulled off. I sat there confused and wondered, “What just happened?” I have shared this story with people over the years, including several in law enforcement. No one could provide a reason other than what I originally thought. I had never been so scared in my life.

As I recall that story, it’s amazing how God will use one part of your life to potentially set a course and use your experience to help others. I’ve now worked with law enforcement for more than two years. I have watched members of the Harrisburg police department run towards dangerous calls for help, observed them de-escalate very tense situations, work long hours to solve cases for grieving families, serve food to needy families and play basketball with kids. Many in law enforcement know there is more work to do to make our community a better place to live, work and raise a family in a welcoming community that we all want to see. I am blessed to now be able to help be a bridge and be a part of the change I want to see for our region. Everyone wants to live in a community where we all can feel safe, valued and respected.

*Blake Lynch is the community policy coordinator for the Harrisburg Police Bureau.*



*Blake Lynch*



*Dr. Kimeka Campbell*

Joy in Justice. It’s 2:12 a.m. My eyes pop open, and my heart begins to race. I immediately begin to think about all the things I must do. I start putting everything in order. Walk the dogs. Shower. Get to work. Attend meetings. Hopefully eat lunch. Answer emails. Make phone calls. Mentor my staff. *It’s only 2:15 a.m.* The other side of my mind is trying to remind me to... *Calm down. Breathe. Go back to sleep.*

*But what about George Floyd?* It’s okay, you can think about that later. *But what about Breonna Taylor?* It’s extremely sad. She was asleep in her own bed. *But what about Shaleek Moss?* Sigh. 2016 seems so long ago. Did we fight hard enough for him? *And don’t forget all the work that you must do in the community!* My mind races on.

This has been my life for a long while. But the persistent anxiety has never been more present and visceral than in the last few weeks. There is so much work to do in the community and so much that goes undone.

But during this resurgence of terror, pain and struggle—there is hope. As I continue my community work, I remember.

Working in this community gives me life. Keeps me sane. Brings me peace. And strangely fosters a sense of joy. It’s a joy that is rooted in the hope for a better future, and the hope of equitable life experiences for all people. It’s the hope that, as I am lifting up Black voices, Black struggles and Black experiences, that we elevate the conversation. That we lift up society. Because when we lift up Black lives, we lift up all lives.

When we lift up Black lives, we lift up all lives. The joy this refrain brings fills my heart and calms me down. I go back to sleep and rest to fight another day.

There is Joy in Justice.

*Dr. Kimeka Campbell is co-founder of Harrisburg Young Professionals of Color.*



I've been so many places in my life and times!

My journey includes three U.S. coasts and four continents. Since 2005, I have referred to myself as Harrisburg's "foster child." A refugee of Katrina, I fled New Orleans and was lucky enough to land here in the Rendell administration as director of cultural and heritage tourism.

Refugees are different than immigrants. We fled from one place instead of choosing another. Foster children are in a perpetual state of waiting for "a forever family." While I work hard to belong, I'm constantly confronted with the salutation, "You're not from here, are you?"

Fifteen years doesn't count! I know people who have been here five decades and still get the same question. You see, unless you were born here, you are never from here. You're instantly measured and identified by your church, the neighborhood you grew up in, or the year you graduated from John Harris or William Penn High School. You're constantly asked, "Who's your Momma? What lodge did your grandfather belong to?"

Foster children always have that lost look in their eyes. We are always searching for a sense of permanency. We're always looking for "our people!"

When I arrive in a new place, I always head directly for the town's MLK Boulevard. Every town usually has a roadway named for the great civil rights leader, right? Not Harrisburg. In fact, it's the only city I've come across that named a boulevard after the Exemplar of Peace and then reversed the action! The only evidence I could ever find of its existence is a disturbing archival record and a pile of signs in the back of a public works building.

As a Black historian, I'm always looking for the presence of the past. Where are the markers of the legacy of my people? Where are the symbols of our achievement against the odds? If you were born here, you might identify the few and vanishing markers of our heritage. If not, you're lost.



While working on a cultural project along the four-mile Riverfront Park, I could not find a single monument, plaque, bench or emblem of achievement exemplifying the contributions of African Americans. Walk the entire Capitol Complex, and you'll find precious few markers promulgating our presence there either!

But let's stay in the present! Where do you take African American tourists to discover Harrisburg's Black amenities? You'll find no thriving Black business district, no African American bookstore, art gallery, Black-owned theater, Afro dance center, literary society, public choir. There's no local Black baseball game to attend or marching band to fall behind. Indeed, when asked, the answer often is, "There used to be!"

"Used to be" is simply not good enough! Cultural identity is built on a foundation of brick-and-mortar institutions, physical signs and symbols which ground and substantiate it. Black-owned enterprises become the loom on which we weave the cultural and multicultural warp and woof of a people. They're the safe houses of our images, icons, artifacts and memorabilia.

I'm tired.

I was confused when they let George Zimmerman walk free in 2014.

I was broken when they killed Tamir Rice, who would have been class of 2020, just like me.

I was fuming when they shot and killed Antwon Rose II, who lived just a few hours from Harrisburg.

I was angry when they told us Sandra Bland killed herself.

Now, I'm tired.

Going to the protest on the Capitol steps and down the riverfront showed just how much our community is hurting. There were people shouting from the top of their lungs, declaring that their lives matter. There were kids, the same age as my siblings, holding signs saying, "I Can't Breathe." We are grieving the lives of all the Black and Brown people who were killed in the hands of the police, some right in our city.

But it doesn't just stop there. The Black community is too often forgotten in Harrisburg. We make up over half of the city's population, yet, far too many of our officials don't look like us. Far too many of the city's workers don't look like us. Some workers even refuse to live in the city out of fear.

We've been pushed out of our homes by climbing rent prices. Our barbershops and stores have been replaced by overpriced restaurants and apartments.

I continue to wonder as I wander, where do Black people exist on the landscape of Harrisburg's memory? Where are the safehouses of our cultural experiences? Who's recording what it is to be Black in Harrisburg for present children and future generations? Who's building monuments to our achievements?

Martin Delaney, the great Pennsylvania abolitionist who fought for freedom with the U.S. Colored Troops in the Civil War, wrote, "Every people should be originators of their own destiny." Today and every day, we should work hard to pay it forward so that we have something to look forward to with hope and something to look backwards on with pride.

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*Lenwood Sloan is the executive director of the Commonwealth Monument Project. He serves as the governor's appointee to the Capitol Preservation Committee and board member of the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation.*

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Even our news outlets portray us as violent, struggling and broken.

But Harrisburg has an incredibly vibrant community. There are so many Black-owned businesses such as La Cultura and Urban Snob that have given back to their community. Black-owned restaurants like Soul Burrito, Crawdaddy's and Queen's BBQ and Southern Cuisine. Even Harris Family Brewery for those who love craft beer.

We are organizing and supporting one another, especially in times like this. Now it's time for the people in power to do their part. If your hands look like that of the officers that took George Floyd's life, or 48 of the 49 presidents, it's time for you to speak up and help save Black lives. I'm not talking changing street names, marching with protestors for a few minutes for photo-ops, or kneeling in kente cloths. Actually do something that will invoke change. Call your lawmakers, donate to Black organizations, and support Black businesses. Lawmakers, draft and push for bills that will actually help us. If you have power in this country and want change, ask yourself: What am I actually doing for Black lives?

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*Yaasmeen Piper is a 2020 graduate of East Stroudsburg University, is a contributor and former intern for TheBurg and is currently serving a fellowship with Spotlight PA.*

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