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🔑 CAREER & WORKPLACE

# BUILDING THE BENCH

How this Columbus institution is 'developing the next cadre of African American leaders'

**The African American Leadership Academy class of 2020:** Standing, from left: Donna James, executive director, AALA; Brian Taylor, dentist, The Gentle Dentist; Tameka Dillard-Neal, director of case management/social work services, Mount Carmel; Omar Griffith, IT portfolio manager, Huntington Bank; Jason Sankey, chief information officer, Ohio Department of Job and Family Services; Yolanda Stewart, assistant principal, Columbus City Schools; Patrick Gamble Jr., community development manager, Aetna; Corey Favor, product manager, OhioHealth; Martina Ellerbe, attorney, Baker & Hostetler LLP; Karim Jackson, college advising manager, I Know I Can; Demetrius Carter, senior analyst of business development, Nationwide Emerging Partnerships; Adrian Moore, financial center manager, Fifth Third Bank; Ryan Sledge, director of worksite operations and product development, OhioHealth; Mo Wright, director of strategy and programs, AALA. Seated, from left: Michelle Farley, public information officer, Ohio Department of Insurance; Erica Womack, chief operating officer, Oasis; LC Johnson, director of community entrepreneurship for Franklin County, Forward Cities; Kourtni Hatton, HR manager, United Way of Central Ohio; Kristian Fenner, assistant division administrator, City of Columbus Division of Power; Jennifer Walton, associate vice president of marketing, Nationwide; Trinity Jeter, assistant dean of students and director of multicultural student affairs, Denison University. Not pictured: Travelle Ellis, associate director of minority initiatives, Zimmer Biomet.

COURTESY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP ACADEMY



By Doug Buchanan – Editor in chief, Columbus Business First

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In 2003, several prominent African American leaders in Columbus got together to discuss a problem.

The well-known figures in the community had come to realize that they were perhaps too well-known and that other capable black leaders should be in the

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### FOOD & LIFESTYLE

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spotlight as well, ready to serve on boards, commissions and in other high-profile roles.

“When well-meaning individuals and groups were interested in diversity, there were a handful of people of color, primarily African American, that they would call,” said Donna James, then president of Nationwide Strategic Investments.



## MO WRIGHT ON THE AALA'S COMMUNITY IMPACT

*“It’s about developing the next cadre of African American leaders to replicate ourselves so there’s a constant pipeline. But in and of itself, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to do that, and it’s what other communities have been doing for generations. So in many ways, we are playing catch-up to what it means to be intentional about that. But it’s not a foreign concept to want to help and support and develop people who look like you.”*

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Over dinner at the former Handke’s Cuisine, the group decided that there should be a mechanism to develop a new generation of African American leaders.

James and her husband, Columbus attorney Larry James, organized the dinner and invited Yvette McGee Brown, then president of the Center for Child and Family Advocacy at Nationwide Children’s Hospital, Janet Jackson, who was Columbus City Attorney at the time, and veteran civic and business leader Warren Tyler. Leadership consultant Donn Vickers, then the director of the Jefferson Center for Learning and the Arts, was also there.

“As we were having dinner, (Larry) said, ‘We need to come up with a way to replicate ourselves,’” recalled McGee Brown, who went on to serve on the Ohio Supreme Court and is now a partner at Jones Day.

“He said every time the phone rings for a black leader, they call one of us - and we’re tired. And so we have to have a way to create more black leaders in the community and to get the majority community to see that there are other people who can lead. It’s not just the (five) people of color sitting around this table.”

Their solution was the African American Leadership Academy, which this month convened its 16th class of fellows since its founding in 2005.

In a city where too often diversity is lacking in C-suites and boardrooms, the academy has been working to ensure there’s a vibrant bench of up-and-coming leaders ready to take more prominent roles in the community.



Mo Wright, left, is the AALA's director of strategy and programs and Donna James is executive director.

JEFFRY KONCZAL

### **‘You are the project’**

The first class launched with 11 participants, including Janelle Coleman, a longtime L Brands executive now with the Columbus Zoo; Laurel Beatty Blunt, now an appellate court judge; and longtime Columbus Board of Education member Shawna Gibbs. Other graduates from the first few years include Columbus Health Commissioner Dr. Mysheika Roberts, former U.S. Attorney Carter Stewart, and Impact Community Action CEO Bo Chilton, among many others.

“They are some of the people ... who’ve been elected to different roles and positions, who’ve started their own businesses, who have moved up to be chief technology officers, general counsels in companies, executive directors in organizations,” said James, now managing director of business advisory services firm Lardon & Associates and the AALA’s executive director.

“It’s been overwhelmingly a positive experience and a tremendous return on the investment of time in the talent that we already have here in this community,” she said.



Photo by Rick Buchanan

## TONI CUNNINGHAM ON HOW PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT HELPS DEAL WITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME

*“When you talk about what’s going on in our head, and how do we unpack, I think the academy is huge for that, because everybody suffers with it – black, white, red, yellow. The question is how do you respond to imposter syndrome? And how do you respond to the voices that are in your head? ... And then if you’re in a leadership role, there are people looking at you, and taking the temperature of what’s going on in the organization based on how you show up, and how you present, and what you say. And so that’s a lot to manage.”*

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Toni Cunningham, managing director of Per Scholas Columbus, was in the 2006 class.

“Many of us were already involved in some sort of service capacity, whether we were volunteering or running programs and different things in the community, helping out nonprofits,” she said. “So we already had that lens and it was just amazing to link up with folks who were like-minded and then go through this journey of self-discovery with them.”

Self-discovery is a big part of the process at the leadership academy. The curriculum is geared less toward how to help run a nonprofit board or learn to network than it is about looking inward.

“Our mantra is ‘you are the project,’” said Mo Wright, the AALA’s director of strategy and programs and CEO of management consulting firm Rama Consulting. “And so while other programs are focused on things like community service or community trusteeship, we are intentional about working with the individual to be their most effective selves.”

“You’d be amazed at the leadership positions our fellows have moved into after really doing that deep dive and understanding what may have been getting in their way,” McGee Brown said during an October luncheon at the Columbus Metropolitan Club.

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IN DETAIL

## AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

FOUNDED: 2005

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:  
Donna James

DIRECTOR OF STRATEGY  
AND PROGRAMS: Mo  
Wright

BOARD CHAIR: Yvette  
McGee Brown

CLASSES: The academy  
accepts up to 20 fellows  
each year for an eight-  
month program that  
runs through August. It  
has had 205 graduates  
in its first 15 years.  
Tuition is covered by  
donations and  
sponsorships.

MISSION: The AALA’s  
mission is to increase  
the number of Central  
Ohio’s African American  
leaders and broaden its  
awareness of a wider  
pool of capable and  
civic minded African  
American professionals.  
Maximizing the potential  
and engagement of all  
social and economic  
sectors is essential to  
the greater purpose of  
building “best at” and  
“best to be in”  
businesses and  
communities.

THE CURRICULUM  
CENTERS ON THREE  
GOALS:

1. Exploring, discovering  
and developing each  
participant’s distinctive  
style of leading.
2. Identifying and  
developing the skill for  
negotiating race in work,  
civic and social settings.
3. Developing a personal  
agenda for growth and  
development through  
access to personal  
coaches and strategic  
connections with highly  
regarded community  
leaders.

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A critical part of that self-discovery takes place in the context of the classes.

“Cultural-based leadership development is important,” said Wright, a 2006 academy graduate. “So a safe space to process and to have individuals who have experienced it, perhaps in the same way, perhaps in different ways, is really, really important to that leader’s holistic development.

“What we talk about in the academy is you learn to play the hand that you’re dealt,” he said. “We can’t change the world, in terms of people having implicit biases or there being institutional racism. What we can do is give folks ... the tools they need to be able to navigate those spaces where those institutions exist, and not be hindered by those environments.”



Photo by Rick Buchanan

## STEPHANIE HIGHTOWER ON WHY THE AALA IS NEEDED IN COLUMBUS

*“When you look in boardrooms today and you look in the C-suites in this community, and you do not see people of color ... and you do not see African Americans of senior status that are sitting on these boards to help navigate in the corporate community, you see more and more why there is a need and why I am not only committed to but a strong proponent of making sure that we have programs such as AALA that can help empower that next generation of African American leaders in our community.”*

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Toni Bell, CEO of Phoenix Consulting in Columbus and a 2019 graduate, said “you feel less alone” when you’re in the AALA classroom.

“You see a program that’s now going into its 16th year and recognize that year after year, we’re generally having the same experiences and it’s across professions,” she said. “I mean, we’ve got doctors and lawyers and teachers and entrepreneurs and scientists - it’s in every field. So it’s definitely a program that confirms your belief that you’re not crazy, right? I’m not alone in what I’m thinking.”

Stephanie Hightower, CEO of the Columbus Urban League and an AALA advisory board member, said at the CMC luncheon that it goes beyond “doing good and doing well.”

“It’s how do we begin to really look at our next generation of folks to help them understand the importance of being your authentic self,” she said. “That it’s OK to be black, that it’s OK to understand what your heritage is and from where you come from. That you don’t have to go into these rooms and have to ‘code switch.’ That our children

can actually be themselves and be able to contribute in a way that is beneficial not only to themselves, but to this community.”



The 2019 class of the African American Leadership Academy at work.

COURTESY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LEADERSHIP ACADEMY

### **Paying it forward**

Hightower said that she had a leg up making inroads into the Columbus corporate community because of her ties to Ohio State University and the fact that she was an Olympic athlete. The Louisville, Kentucky, native was a track star at Ohio State and a four-time U.S. Champion in the 100-meter hurdles. She said even with that advantage, it wasn't easy for her, showing the difficulty faced by most African Americans who don't have the built-in networks of people in power that most white people can tap into.

“I think that many of you are in positions within the corporate or nonprofit community or in higher education, and you have a responsibility,” she said to the Columbus Metropolitan Club gathering. “You sit in your seats now because there was somebody else that helped you to get there. And sometimes we forget about that. ... So you have a responsibility to not only help the next, but please don't forget how you got to the room.”

McGee Brown had another message for Columbus' corporate community - one that is focused on the business benefits of valuing diversity.

“If you're looking in your boardroom, if you're looking at your senior management, if you're looking at your staff meetings, and there are no people of color sitting around the table, that's something that needs to be cured,” she said. “Because the reality is your customer base is becoming increasingly people of color. And even from a business standpoint, you need to have viewpoints of people that don't look like you.

“So I would say everybody has to do an audit, not just looking at the diversity numbers on your macro monthly personnel spreadsheet, but look at the rooms that you're in,” she said. “When you're making critical decisions, are there people in there who reflect the rich diversity of this community?”



Photo by Jeffry Konczal

## DONNA JAMES ON DIVERSITY AND CORPORATE CULTURE

*“You can create a mosaic of people but if you don’t figure out a way to knit them together and have a culture that makes them and the people who are already there feel included and valued, you’re just going to have a revolving door. It’s equivalent of trying to make a quilt and you have all these different pieces of fabric, but you don’t take the time to sew it together. You don’t take the time to really create that quilt, in such a way that it is a warm and nurturing and supportive environment. No matter what color or gender you are, but especially if you are changing the game by bringing on women and bringing in people of color, you have to rethink culture. I’m fond of saying, and it’s not my quote, but it’s so true: ‘Culture will eat a good strategy for lunch.’”*

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