

The Columbus Dispatch

Black leaders in Columbus: This time feels different

By [Ken Gordon](#)

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Although the underlying issues that spawned the current protests are not new, African-American community leaders say they are heartened by the widespread support they see and are generally optimistic that real change in black Americans' lives will result.

Whether they are getting pepper-sprayed on the front lines or are behind the scenes watching from home, African-American leaders in Columbus generally feel optimistic that the recent protests will make a difference.

It began a week and a half ago in Columbus with protests over the May 25 death of George Floyd, a black man, after a white police officer in Minneapolis knelt on his neck. Protesters have been calling since for an end to systemic racism.

Local leaders find hope in the breadth and diversity of the movement. And they stress that this could mean that unlike after previous deaths of black men, the calls for change will not fade quietly away this time.

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"It's like an alarm is sounding," said Franklin County Commissioner Kevin Boyce. "What happened to George Floyd was tragic and awful and unnecessary, but if there were a silver lining, it would be that this has awakened a beast. The masses are speaking."

Boyce was among three local leaders — the others were City Council President Shannon Hardin and U.S. Rep. Joyce Beatty — hit with pepper spray by police on May 30 as they took part in a Downtown protest.

Former Mayor Michael B. Coleman said he sees his role as being a consultant and adviser, reaching out to those he knows in government and to those in the corporate community where he now works as a partner with the Ice Miller law firm.

Although Coleman is not in the streets, that doesn't mean that the man who led the city for 16 years (2000-2016) is shy about sharing his thoughts.

"I've been in the trenches for a long time, fighting this battle," Coleman said, "and I'm more optimistic than I've ever been. I've always said no good crisis should go to waste, and this is a crisis where we can forge real change."

Coleman said he feels that way because he is heartened by the diversity he sees in the people involved in the protests and marches and just standing at suburban schools and intersections.

"I see white and black folks together, and I see young and old folks together," he said. "I think what makes this different than the past is that part of the community that heretofore has not stepped up on issues of racism is now motivated to do so."

Coleman said he has given Mayor Andrew J. Ginther advice and encouragement, and he said he believes that his successor has done a good job.

Coleman also is stressing the role that corporate Columbus can play in helping the cause. He called a letter that more than 1,200 business leaders signed, supporting the City Council's declaration of racism as a public-health crisis, "a good first step."

"But there needs to be another step that goes beyond signing letters," Coleman said. "Businesses need to take action, look at their own business and see what they can do about diversity in their employees and on their boards."

Jonathan Moody agrees that the corporate world needs to play a leading role. As CEO of the black-owned Moody Nolan architecture firm, he wants to see corporations invest in initiatives that would help level the playing field in health care and education, among other areas.

But he acknowledges that he has wrestled with what, if anything, he could add to the discussion.

“I’ve done a lot of soul-searching as to whether or not I should or need to say anything, and I was really conflicted about it,” he said. “But I realize that being silent offers others in the room the opportunity to point at me and said, ‘He didn’t say anything.’ Not saying anything is also a statement.”

And so, as he says he does not believe that people can ever completely erase their unconscious biases, Moody said he wants to see the focus on “measurables” that can help improve people’s lives.

Larry James knows all about people pointing at him and saying things, as Moody referenced. The managing partner of the law firm Crabbe, Brown & James has been a longtime leader in the African American arts community, helping to create the King Arts Center and to renovate and reopen the Lincoln Theatre in Olde Towne East.

Meanwhile, the former city safety director also serves as general counsel to the National Fraternal Order of Police. The Columbus chapter of the FOP has consistently resisted the creation of a civilian-review board to oversee the police department, one of the protest’s key demands.

And on Friday, Ginther announced that he would create such a board.

“I have been called an ‘Uncle Tom,’” James said. “As a leader, you have to be above that type of character assassination.”

While Coleman and Moody talk about institutional change, Christie Angel sees a need to promote change on an individual level as well.

As president and CEO of YWCA Columbus, she is working with others on “action steps” for people, she said.

“There is a benefit to learning the history of racism over 400 years in America,” Angel said. “And you also become an anti-racist and incorporate things into your daily life like talking to children. You can be intentional about it.”

Angel stressed the importance of keeping the issues in the forefront, even if the street protests end.

“This is, as they say, the long game, right?” she said. “We have to use this as our time of urgency; we can’t let that dissipate.”

Boyce pointed out that America was built on protests, since the days of patriots and the Boston Tea Party. He said they are “part of our DNA,” and he believes they will continue, although they might change shape and turn into boycotts or something else.

Columbus Urban League President and CEO Stephanie Hightower urged those involved in the movement not to give up. Like Coleman, she also is buoyed by the involvement and energy of the young.

“There’s nothing new about this,” Hightower said. “We’ve been having these conversations for years, and nothing has happened. All of these ideas have stagnated because of our inability to sustain a demand for change.

“But what these young people are doing right now is saying to us — they’re saying — ‘We don’t want our legacy to continue to look like this.’”

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