

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## NEWS

# Two years after George Floyd's death, Columbus' Black leaders say more change needed in city



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Artist Lisa McLymont didn't want to see the video.

When she learned about the news, McLymont did what she could to avoid watching the widely circulated video of George Floyd's suffocation death while pinned under the knee of Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

"But it filters through and I ended up seeing it maybe a week later," said McLymont. "I'd avoided it that long."

When Columbus Urban League president and CEO Stephanie Hightower saw the video, she was glued to the TV in her office in disbelief. She said she then went home and had a conversation with one of the Black men in her life — her son.

"After a while when they would replay it, I would have to turn my head or cut it off because I couldn't watch it anymore," Hightower said. "It just crushed my soul."

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For McLymont, Hightower and many other Black people, the distressing scene of another person of color dying at the hands of law enforcement triggered feelings of trauma. But if those feelings had long simmered beneath the surface, Floyd's death brought them to the fore.

On May 25, 2020, Chauvin, who is white, was seen on video pinning the neck of Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, to the ground for more than nine minutes after police responded to a report that Floyd had used a counterfeit \$20 bill.

Video of Floyd's killing went viral, sparking weeks of protests across the country, including in Columbus.

Now, on the two-year anniversary of his death, McLymont, Hightower and other leaders said they are beginning to see progress for Columbus' Black community. But they also believe more needs to be done to fight systemic racism in Columbus — not only with police reform, but by having diverse workplaces and offering more opportunities for Black businesses and organizations.

"The Urban League is here to do that work; that's what we are built for," Hightower said. "We're going to maintain that sense of urgency to those individuals and corporations and entities that have committed to creating an equitable Columbus and that believe in prosperity for all."

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## **Transferring pain into art**

McLymont, at the time a graphic designer at the Columbus Association of Performing Arts (CAPA), was an integral part of several public art projects during the protests in the summer of 2020 and beyond.

Amid the early days of demonstrations, McLymont was among artists who painted the plywood boards that many Downtown businesses installed to protect their buildings from damage.

Most notably, McLymont was part of a team that painted boards outside of the Ohio Theatre as part of the #ArtUnitesCbus initiative led by CAPA and the Greater Columbus Arts Council (GCAC.)

By fall, McLymont was recruited to be a lead artist for what came to be called the “Deliver Black Dreams” campaign. Spearheaded by GCAC and the Maroon Arts Group with city funding, the multi-year project began with the creation of the first of six planned public murals in the Milo-Grogan neighborhood.

Two more large-scale murals have since been installed in the Hilltop and on the South Side, while the art covering the plywood boards have been displayed at various outdoor exhibitions since being removed from the buildings.

“We really worked hard to make a statement and it pushed a lot of people to positivity,” McLymont said. “We packed up our tools and we left the art behind thinking it would not survive, and it has survived.”

But while she's proud of how her art has endured, McLymont fears that the message of a movement that once seemed universal has been overshadowed by more incidents of police violence.

Among them: On the day that Chauvin was convicted in Minneapolis of Floyd's murder, Ma'Khia Bryant, a 16-year-old Black girl in Columbus, was shot and killed by a Columbus police officer as she attempted to stab a young Black woman, sparking more protests in the city.

“There’s just so much pain here that’s needless ... today we have real people dying who are Black and there is no justice for their lives” McLymont said. “But if we lose hope, then we’ve lost everything; people who are here are still fighting for them.”

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## A time for change

While McLymont decided to sit out on the protests, the Rev. Jefferey P. Kee was on the front lines as he participated in several demonstrations. The senior pastor of New Faith Baptist Church in Columbus' Olde Towne East neighborhood considers his place of worship a "justice-minded church" that speaks out on issues like racism, education and affordable housing.

Kee, who said he was angered by what he saw in the George Floyd video, turned his frustration into activism by calling for reform within the Columbus Division of Police. He is part of two groups called Faith in Public Life and the Area Religious Coalition, which consist of local and national coalitions of faith leaders who have a history of speaking out against decisions made by city leaders in Columbus.

Kee said he has a distrust of Columbus police, citing the death of Andre Hill, an unarmed Black man fatally shot by Officer Adam Coy on Dec. 22, 2020. He also cited the fatal Dec. 4, 2020 shooting of Casey Goodson Jr., a Black man licensed to carry a concealed weapon, as

another example, though Goodson was shot by former Franklin County Sheriff's SWAT Deputy Jason Meade.

"Until that trust is earned, I'm still going to be right here trying to see what's actually happening because too much has happened, and continues to happen, from officers who have been there for many, many years," Kee said. "And they are a part of the culture that disproportionately uses a hard and excessive hand when it comes to African Americans, in particular, African American males."

However, Kee said the Columbus Division of Police is moving in the right direction with the hiring last year of Chief Elaine Bryant and First Assistant Chief LaShanna Potts, both Black and formerly of the Detroit Police Department.

"I commend both of them, I want to see both of them do well," Kee said. "But the reality is, there are many people who are still there who are part of the status quo. It's going to take some time to get them out. It's not going to change overnight. And while (Bryant and LaShanna) have good intentions, I think we need to hold both of them under scrutiny."

One solution Kee believes will help bridge the gap between local law enforcement and the Black community is reconciliation training, where police and residents work together to address past issues, grievances and misconceptions.

"We need to have measurable outcomes," he said. "We need to not just say that, because we have somebody new in office, that is the answer. We have to make sure that we have accountability to make sure that that we're progressing in the right direction."

## **'Why now?'**

Like Kee, NAACP Columbus president Nana Watson felt Floyd's death and the ongoing battle with police brutality in the United States was a sign that it was time for police reform in the city.

Soon after the protests began in late May 2020, she called for creation of a civilian review board for Columbus police. Watson told The Dispatch at the time that the Columbus review board should have subpoena power to be able to fully investigate complaints and look at records, and to have credibility with the community.

The civilian board would come into fruition last March, when Ginther announced nine people who would become the first members of the board.

NAACP Columbus has also been holding entities accountable by keeping track of the number of Black employees inside companies and agencies, Watson said. Things the organization looks for include how many Black employees hold key positions, and if people of color serve on the board.

"So most corporations and entities now say they have DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion)," Watson said. "But why did it take the murder of a Black man for you to now say we need diversity and inclusion? Why now?"

## **Partnering for social justice**

Since the events of 2020, Hightower said more people in Columbus are recognizing the Urban League and its mission, which includes the nonprofit's nine-pillar agenda: COVID relief, education, workforce development, criminal justice reform, voting rights, health care, small business support, access to technology and housing.

Last year, JPMorgan Chase partnered with the Urban League and three other Columbus organizations to expand its hiring efforts by launching a community-based hiring model that will help ex-offenders secure employment.

Then last September, the Columbus Foundation made its largest investment to the organization by donating \$500,000. The grant went toward personnel, technology and management systems, bolstering the Urban League's social justice efforts.

"Entities like the Columbus Foundation put their money where their mouth was and said, 'We may not have been supporting and bringing in the resources that we need to for a Black-led organization,'" Hightower said.

However, Hightower said the city needs to start looking at finding solutions in other areas, such as affordable housing, ensuring Black businesses have access to capital, and addressing mental health in Black youth.

The process is going to be hard work, Hightower said, but she noted that the Urban League is dedicated to being a part of the solution and helping city leaders create a more equitable Columbus.

"Everybody needs to understand after 200 years of this level of oppression, it's going to take a while," Hightower said. "But if we're all stacking hands together and maintaining that sense of urgency, I think we can get it done."

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