

Anti-Racism and Equity Responses

**From Kalamazoo City Mayoral
and Commissioner Candidates
2023**



Kalamazoo City Mayoral and Commissioner Candidates - Anti-Racism and Equity Responses Brought To You by The Equity Collective

Questions sent to Mayoral and City Commissioner Candidates:

Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor? Why or why not? Please give an example.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

The Equity Collective includes individuals/leaders and non -partisan organizations committed to equity, anti-racism and Building the Beloved Community in Kalamazoo. We do NOT endorse candidates and are providing Candidates' verbatim answers as information.



John Allen - Candidate for City Mayor



Introduction: Pro-Motorist, Pro-Police, Pro-Business. "Streets & Meets"

Details at: FaceBook, "Allen for Mayor" <https://www.facebook.com/groups/658279429228620>

Age 76. 50 years City Resident. UM Undergrad ('69), and Law ('72). Army Officer 8 years. Senior Counsel Varnum LLP.

No facial photo--those are devices for prejudice. (That's why they are not on resumes and job applications.)

The Campaign Photo is the US Flag. Focus on Issues, not faces.

Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor?

Why or why not? Please give an example.

"Color Blind" is both our moral imperative and The Law, as recently confirmed by the US Supreme Court in its 2023 North Carolina and Harvard decisions. The 14th Amendment requires that all government policies and practices ("state action"—that includes the City), be "Color Blind". Not new-- taught to me by my Parents, my Teachers, my Church, and the US Army.

This means: (1) skin color is superficial and irrelevant to the quality of a person's character, ability or worthiness, (2) in a merit-based society, skin color is irrelevant to merit judgments and fairness, (3) merit and fairness are flawed if skin color is taken into the calculation, (4) PERSONNALLY ignoring skin color when interacting with people is the best way to avoid racial discrimination.

In his 1963 "I Have a Dream" Speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." We must realize that dream.

America's greatest African American lawyer, Thurgood Marshall (later SCOTUS Justice), advocated the "Color Blind" standard in obtaining his victorious decision in 1954 Brown v Board of Education.

EXAMPLE-City Commission Rule/ Policy 10-1 (12/16/21), p. 8, Sec. 12(b)(ii) "Advisory Boards and Commissions", now saying that Appointments must "represent a cross-section of gender, race..." etc. Commission Appointments must be based ONLY on Merit and Objective Qualifications.

That is Good Morals, and The Law.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

Our biggest challenges cross racial and ethnic lines: Poverty; School Attendance; Work Ethic; Family Structure. Challenges often have racial or ethnic correlations, but our focus is overcoming the Challenges, not race or ethnic factors.

City Policy might have incidental beneficial effects on one race or "protected class", but that must never be the criterion for the "Color Blind" Policy. In Gratz v Bolinger (2003), SCOTUS Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said the Constitution still allows government to be "both color blind and color conscious."

The Best Strategy is not in government. We must all PERSONALLY set Examples of Courage in battling these Challenges, promoting Heroes and Heroines.

My Mother often told the story of her immigrant father (my grandfather-big baseball fan) taking her to a Pittsburgh Pirates game in 1947, against the Brooklyn Dodgers featuring the first Black MLB player, rookie Jackie Robinson, who faced awful treatment. When Mr. Robinson hit a Home Run, the crowd booed with epithets.

My grandfather immediately stood and said, "Elizabeth, a Home Run is a Home Run, no matter who hits it. We are leaving." And they left, never returning to another Pirates game.

The Book and Movie "42" have this incident. Please show it to your kids.

That is the sort of Courageous Example we need to show our children. And it gave my Father and Mother the beliefs they passed on to me. I've done my best to set the same Example and pass the same beliefs to my kids and family.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

My Most Challenging Personal Experience: As a young Army Captain, JAG Officer Lawyer, 50 years ago, I was attached as a Special Judge Advocate to 7th Special Forces Group (Green Berets) then in North Carolina—all marvelous and courageous elite warriors, doing the most dangerous work every day. It was an honor to serve with them.

By law, the US Army had been racially integrated since 1948. But in the early 1970s, and even among elite troops, there was still resistance by some to take orders and commands from Black Officers and NCOs, some troops frequently complaining that "It Will Disrupt the Unit."

It was early in the days of overcoming racial discrimination in American society, and that change was hard for some people, especially those whose lives had been filled back then with bad examples of racial prejudice.

The 7th SF's highest-ranking lawyer, a Staff JAG Colonel, had a simple response-

"Yes, it will Disrupt the Unit. And the Unit will Get Over It."

And it did. It changed. Violations were relentlessly corrected, and repeated ones were formally punished under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

With my full support. And with the full support of every commander, regardless of color--Black. White, Brown, and Yellow. The Army is just "Green".

"Color Blind" City government will require revolutionary and evolutionary change. It will be difficult for some to do. But it must happen. It is The Law.

"It Will Disrupt the Unit."

But, "The Unit will Get Over It."

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

Both Good Morals and The Law now require City Government to be "Color Blind." Very hard for some, but a Voice for it must be heard.

Racially oriented policies divisively separate us into falsely labelled groups, that some then wrongfully use for political and financial gain. That must stop.

African American SCOTUS Justice Clarence Thomas said in Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Peña (1995) and on CBS: the Constitution's Equal Protection Clause and 14th Amendment forbid consideration of race, race-based affirmative action or preferential treatment. Race-oriented programs create "a cult of victimization" and imply Black people require "special treatment in order to succeed". That's how racially-oriented policies foster prejudice.

Experience shows they are also doomed to failure.

Success for every person to overcome Poverty depends on strong Work Ethic, School Attendance, Family Structure. Those Challenges cross all lines, regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, age, or any other protected status. The City must serve as an Example, with "Color Blind" Policies and Practices, focusing on the Challenges, not race --along with work by the same persons who taught me--Parents, Teachers, Churches.

Then, Violations must be relentlessly corrected. Repeated ones must be met with real sanctions.

Investing in "Color Blind" City Policies focusing on Challenges-- Poverty; School Attendance; Work Ethic; Family Structure--and not on race, will yield dividends for ALL the City.

Outdated City Policies must change to "Color Blind". That will be hard for many. But it must happen.

It will "Disrupt the Unit". And "The Unit will Get Over It."

David Anderson - Candidate for City Mayor

My name is David Anderson and I have the honor of serving as Mayor of the City of Kalamazoo. I was first elected to the City Commission in 2005 and have been Mayor since 2019. I am employed as the Director of Housing and Facilities at Integrated Services of Kalamazoo, the County mental health provider. I am a graduate of Kalamazoo Public Schools as are our four daughters.



Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor?

Why or why not? Please give an example.

As Mayor of the City of Kalamazoo, it is critically important to address issues of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. All residents of the City should be valued and treated with dignity and respect. The Mayor can provide leadership symbolically and in working with the City Commission to support policies and practices that serve this goal. The Commission has created a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion department and provided funding for staffing and ongoing operations. It is our goal that all City services will be delivered reflective of these values and that we will be a model of inclusion for all who reside in or visit the City of Kalamazoo.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

The challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities in Kalamazoo include lower household incomes, poorer health outcomes, lagging educational attainment and lower rates of home and business ownership. I have been involved in substantial efforts to promote small business formation and funding, provide training for contractors and entrepreneurs, increase home ownership, and support initiatives that provide enrichment and learning activities for young people. The majority of these endeavors are focused on residents of neighborhoods that have suffered from a historic lack of investment and resources, and they are making a difference.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

As Mayor, I needed to repair and rebuild community relationships in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd and the outpouring of sadness, anger and frustration related to our need for fair, equitable community policing and City policies. I remained engaged, reaching out to reinforce and create relationships with residents who had strong concerns and differing experiences. The City had already been in the process of implementing a more comprehensive institutional focus on issues of equity and inclusion. Those efforts were augmented with the creation of a DEI department via ordinance, and increased funding for the critically important mission.

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

If elected, I intend to keep supporting and highlighting our efforts to ensure that all residents of the City of Kalamazoo are treated equitably and receive the attention and resources necessary to live full lives. Although a long history of disparities in treatment and resource availability has led to a challenging environment of intergenerational poverty and diminished opportunity, I hope that the continued focus and efforts of the City of Kalamazoo will contribute to a more inclusive community where all residents can aspire to the life of their dreams. We must continue building an innovative, vibrant, and resilient culture in Kalamazoo that allows all residents to thrive together, support each other and share lives filled with meaning and purpose in community.

Arlena Travena Jones - Candidate for City Mayor

My name is Arlena Travena Jones I was born in Kalamazoo Michigan I love God and family first. I am anti- racist who believe in the win-win philosophy, strategy, in life as well as business. I believe in doing what is right even when it is hard.



Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor? Why or why not? Please give an example.

I believe it is extremely important to address Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion issues as a City Mayor. There is a direct connection between racism and poverty. That creates disproportioned burdens and adversities. That is ripping birth through adulthood and making people fall to their own devices. Dealing with anxiety depression and crime, among others. The average household income in Kalamazoo County is \$93,059 while the median household income is at \$66,600 per year. The poverty threshold for a family of four is 29,960. The estimated cost of raising one child is \$15,512 - \$17,459.43 per year. Earnings of White, non Hispanic men age 20-29 group \$33,600 compared to Black, non Hispanic age 20-29, \$25,000. The Likelihood of going to prison among Black men are 28.5% and for Black woman 3.6%, compared to White men are 4.4%, and White woman 0.5% Hispanic men 16%, and Hispanic Women 1.5%. On average, it costs \$48,000 per year. based on DATAUAS. The population white non-Hispanic make up 66.06% and Black, non- hispanic make up 22.11% the population of 73,707. Persons in poverty is 27.8%. White being at 30% compared to 52% Black. As the mayor I would employ equality and equity to bridge the final median gap, that will turn in its own axels, by being purposeful about reversing the damage that inequality has caused.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

In the city of Kalamazoo, the challenges faced by historically under represented communities. The strategies that I have used to address these issues, using my skills in television producer, production and editor, to tell the stories and highlight families, individuals, and businesses that have been pursuing the right things. Educators, entrepreneurs, business owners, and working professionals to show a representation of diversity of the under represented individuals. I have use my platform to be an encouragement to our youth to reach their quantum goals. The families can sit down together and be educated, entertained and have meaningful conversation with one another with wholesome morals and values as a focal point. This platform will allow me to highlight those youth in our community and individuals that are doing the right thing, giving them a platform to show their talents, skills and gifts to one another locally. That creates an opportunity to patronize individuals who deserve positive recognition. If you focus on the good, you'll get more good. Putting a mindset of humanity in our daily lives, love one another as brothers and sister, neighbors and communities.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

I believe my first experience of dealing with the challenges was in elementary school. I feel like on very rare occasions, that I felt a true respect from any of my teachers. I remember my third grade teacher sending me out of the classroom because she asked the question in regards to children who have freckles, please stand up, so I stood up, and when she came out into the hallway to speak with me, she grab my face, looked me in my eyes and said oh, I never met a black person with freckles befor. Until that moment, I never was concerned or noticed my freckles. I always felt insecure until adulthood, because of her ignorance. I am now past that in my life, but it left a lasting impression on me. I never thought that if I told my parents it would've made a difference because from early age in Kalamazoo, it felt like some people could get away with anything or other people if they sneezed wrong, they will get in the most trouble ever. I always looked around my classmates and I could see why students could get away with misbehaving, while teachers were extremely strict on the black students. We were afraid to say something to our parents, due to the consequences. always felt that if we said anything to our parents. They will be nothing done about it because he won't believe us no one ever believes the black children, if we ever speak up, we are shown that our thoughts words and feelings don't matter, and that when the white parents spoke up for their children, there was immediate consequences down to any of the Blackstone as if they were involved in the situation even if it wasn't our fault And that still feels true today when I look around Kalamazoo when I see the city, Kalamazoo still seems to have a death heir to his black community. We're only looking at us for a wrong or our bad quick to give us harsh penalties as we see our white, neighbors and friends do twice as much trouble and get away with it, and we have no one to speak to about it and we feel very unheard and that part feels very purposeful. Our city parks in downtown offer many of varieties for his white citizens and very few for our blacks are black citizens have to shut down early are limitations . where we see our white neighbors brothers and sisters have full range of everything in the downtown area with only protection special arrangements and privileges to make sure that they have a good time and all the convenience and amenities one could offer with the red carpet treatment.

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

If elected, how would I invest my time and energy creating racial equality in this position as city mayor we would purchase over 100 businesses that is already creating a revenue stream and offer jobs to men and women with a day labor philosophy. They will all be essential work blue-collar jobs. We're putting 10 men and women at each location daily working with either skills, experience or apprentice opportunity to pay a fair wage that is daily broken down from \$26.47 an hour and up working nine hours a day five days a week they will be first shift positions providing training and education with the same work. Our pay after three months on a position if one person decides if they enjoy their job, they can start working full-time after three months with benefits. The companies that have been purchased will get vouchers to provide benefits and retirement and raises to the employees that have always been working there. They will be a 24 hour seven day a week recycle and compost business that helps clean up after each of these companies and creates work for individuals around the clock. We will have a remote virtual piece to the job in order to operate the daily pay and work provision fillings. We will continually purchase more businesses and hire more people to do the work. The work that is required to be done in the city will be done by local residence and are most parched areas, which will allow them to make a fair days pay for fair days work this what position them to take care of their family purchase homes have transportation and pay off that this also reduces the temptation for crime as though they are making a minimum of \$208.33 today minimum the Atlanta did with diversity get that helps the community to be able to build business enterprise and allow family to provide a good quality of life for the family and children that will remove the stress that has plagued our youth for lack of basic needs in their means, and some of their wants which will allow their neighborhoods to be safer. children will be able to be involved in more extracurricular activities and camps and things to enjoy for learning experiences , that will help the community turn on its own axis where every neighborhood in the city of Kalamazoo are thriving and safe. The crime rates will be less and we will have a higher graduation rate which allows our children to circles dreams. I feel at home with Kalamazoo for the next generations to come.

James P. Ayers - Candidate for City Commissioner

I'm James P. Ayers, candidate for Kalamazoo City Commission. I'm 41 and a first-generation college graduate: speaking in the accent of civil rights and civil liberties comes more naturally for me than the more recent vocabulary of DEI, although I think the goals are the same – see the sacred rose of justice by any other name . . . And although I'm an agnostic I believe grace is the gateway to the Beloved Community.



Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor?

Why or why not? Please give an example.

Yes, it is important to address DEI issues as a City Commissioner because this is how we continue the work defending hard-won civil rights and civil liberties. For example, we do not impose identity or ideology screening tests before inviting individuals to public comment at City Commission meetings. Freedom of political speech must continue to be the cornerstone defense against the silencing of minority voices.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

Neighborhood segregation and industrial fallout have shaped our city. In addition to many other benefits, creating an over-the-road “subway” system connecting 8-12 neighborhood stations with downtown would help to break down historic barriers by encouraging movement across the City. The City is only five miles across, but that is a long five miles if you don't have a phone or a car and you're trying to get to a City Commission meeting to speak your concerns into the record. This is especially true if it's a day you've been told to “stay inside” because the air is unbreathable as the effects of industrial fallout continue . . . My strategies for this work so far center on strengthening the Eastside Neighborhood Association as an organizational hub and advocate for, not just fellow Eastsiders, but all residents of Kalamazoo. Progress is ongoing.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

The greatest challenge with DEI is perennial: We have a responsibility to pursue DEI, but the pursuit must be bounded by inalienable rights if we are to truly share in a pluralistic, free society. At the same time, the defense of inalienable rights is bounded by our responsibilities, both DEI and otherwise. It is the task of every generation to discover its own balance between rights and responsibilities. And the latest generation to come of age has never known a world without a surveillance state at perpetual war. Of course civil rights and civil liberties are starting to sound like words in a foreign language. How many cameras does it take to reach the Beloved Community; how many wars? This should not be normal.

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

If elected I would act within the powers of the office of Commissioner to promote investment in: Financial literacy. Technology literacy (including coding and AI interface). Construction and mechanical literacy. Urban agriculture. We are all less vulnerable if we can feed ourselves, handle our business, and fix and build for ourselves. We are more connected to each other when we have skills to share.

Jeanne Hess - Candidate for City Commissioner

I am Jeanne Hess, retired coach, professor and associate chaplain from Kalamazoo College, and current city commissioner. I'm running for re-election because I love this city, our employees, and our residents, with my campaign focused on themes of Education, Collaboration, and Sustainability.



Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor?

Why or why not? Please give an example.

It is absolutely necessary to address DEI issues at the Commission level, because we are the representatives of the people, who, in Kalamazoo are wonderfully diverse. Commission and the City Manager began with an official act in 2020 by appointing our inaugural DEI Director, Dorla Bonner. Dorla soon engaged MPHJ, an institute focused on diversity, health equity and social justice, who gathered data from city employees around issues of race, equity and inclusion, and found that much intentional work was necessary within our city employees. Soon thereafter, Dorla retired, and City Manager Ritsema appointed Tanya-Hewitt-Smith as the Director. The DEI department reviews internal processes and policies with an equity lens in addition to evaluating public programs and projects of the city. DEI also facilitates education and training for staff, and works together with external partners to advance our community-wide goals around DEI. In December of 2022, I was appointed to a commission DEI subcommittee to explore how the office itself would be best codified in perpetuity. Working with the city attorney, we drafted an ordinance that established the DEI department and its director, so that future city managers may not erase the department from existence. It passed unanimously. I feel that this is an important step in the evolution of our city government toward greater equity. We also must continue to grow outside the walls of city government to the greater community as we work together to dismantle racism in Kalamazoo.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

The challenges are many for the BIPOC community in Kalamazoo. From higher levels of poverty to a greater level of infant and maternal mortality; from the redlining of communities of color leading to an inability to grow generational wealth; from laws and a legal system targeting BIPOC into higher levels of incarceration to the data from the Kalamazoo Promise confirming the lowest number of Promise recipients are black males; to environmental racism within our core neighborhoods; most urgent, our young men are killing each other with deadly weapons. While I was aware of many of these issues in 2019, I am now part of a team collaborating to address them all. I believe that racism is a condition of the soul. My education and my faith tell me that I need to do better. I've worked on dismantling racism within my church community in the 24-week Just Faith series and beyond; I am a member of the Northside Ministerial Alliance, whose mission is "Leading change in the community through the unified church." I have attended our DEI trainings, and worked to fund anti-gun violence initiatives. I participate in City Lead, a program intended to break down racial barriers. I'm on the Youth Development subcommittee, who works with our Parks Department, Public Safety, KYDnet and Kalamazoo Public Schools. We have collaborated with the KCF on the Blueprint for Peace, which addresses so many of our issues, gun-violence at the heart. The most recent statistics from KDPS indicate that even though homicides are up, total shootings and violent crimes are down.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

I would have to say that it was the response here in Kalamazoo to the George Floyd murder, and all the community violence and further white supremacy response with the proud boys' visit to Kalamazoo. I attended the rally and march throughout downtown to show my solidarity with the BLM movement, but when the violence began to break out, I felt helpless as anger, violence, and destruction wreaked havoc on our city. Commissioners received regular updates, and it was difficult to both read and watch the efforts of those trying to keep the peace be ineffective. The separation caused by the chaos of that week created mistrust of our officers, our leadership, and grew racial tensions. As a commissioner, I showed up to those meetings that followed and listened. Sometimes the best thing to do is listen. I heard trauma, anger at injustice and police brutality, and generations of effects of white supremacy coming forth. I realized that one DEI officer wasn't going to make it go away, and committed myself to consciously love and support our city employees and my community. Healing the root of this kind of violence will literally take a miracle. Marianne Williamson has written, "Separation leads to disintegration, and joining leads to miracles." I will continue to seek such a miracle as I join with, and love Kalamazoo to rebuild it into the desired Beloved Community.

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

As a professor of health at Kalamazoo College, I used the "Illness-Wellness Continuum" as a basis for teaching my class. In one direction was signs, symptoms, chronic disease, and early death. The opposite direction is awareness, education, change, growth, and a higher level of wellness. And anywhere along the continuum up until early death, one could choose wellness by becoming aware of the issues. I feel that we've made good progress toward awareness of what racial equity is, and why we need to achieve it. It is the education piece, though, that will take intentional time and effort by our city government and all our community members to move on into growth and change, and a higher level of well-being. Education literally means "to draw forth." I will choose to spend my time as a commissioner working with all of our city partners to claim an education focus for our city. I agree with Michelle Obama, who has often talked about education being the way out of poverty. The education I speak of isn't simply academic, although we have 3 amazing institutions, the Promise, and several arts and trades schools from which to choose. I want to honor the education efforts of our non-profits in their work toward literacy for all, financial literacy, racial healing, physical and mental health literacy, and even spiritual literacy. Thus, I will take the themes of Education, Collaboration and Sustainability into my next term: Education for all; Collaboration with all; and Sustainability of the relationships, the faith and the hope that we can do this work together.

Esteven Juarez - Candidate for City Commissioner



Introduction: My name is Esteven Juarez. I am 37 years old, married, and a father of three. For the past two years I have served diligently as a Kalamazoo City Commissioner. I am the lead Pastor of Vanguard Church - a local ministry in the city of Kalamazoo. I come from a hard-working migrant family that instilled a depth of work ethic within me, and I apply that to the way I serve my community. As a lifetime resident of this beautiful city, I am determined to help create generational transformations and a prosperous and safe city.

Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor?

Why or why not? Please give an example.

YES!!! DEI is a must that we as the City of Kalamazoo should address. There is a wide range of issues in DEI work. DEI is not linear. We must see it from its multi-layered viewpoints; understanding that the foundation of this work must be based in love, restoration, and seeing all humans as the same. We need to be educated in what DEI really means - it is inclusion of all people. It is the very fabric of humanity for our existence that we do this work together. The city of Kalamazoo is greatly invested in this work. We have set forth these necessary efforts and stand by them.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

We see underrepresentation far too often as communities of color. I am the second Hispanic in the HISTORY of Kalamazoo to be elected on the city commission. For way too long, communities of color have been misrepresented. There needs to be intentional repairs for these communities; the struggles that people of color face have been overlooked for decades. For the last two years, I have helped foster change for these underrepresented communities. Being reelected means four more years of dedication and passion to create generational transformation so our communities will thrive and prosper with all of Kalamazoo. The importance of being in this position grants us the advantage of no longer being left out of vital conversations that regard and affect our communities. As for strategy, the biggest barrier we face in the BIPOC community is the lack of awareness and being educated enough to unify our efforts to create generational transformation. We must think differently in order to be different. Seven years ago, I created a workforce development program called Momentum at Urban Alliance – a community-based nonprofit, where we taught the participants employability skills and life skills. It provided participants' social mobility that helped transform their lives.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

The day I realized I was the second Hispanic in the history of Kalamazoo to be elected to the city commission. I've realized that I am a trail blazer for people like me. My personal story should have ended statistically "too soon". I've learned to overcome many challenges and obstacles in my life. The resiliency in me allowed me to persevere and overcome these challenges. These characteristics afforded me to never give up and to keep pressing forward because change was around the corner. My grandfather always taught me to never give up and to keep fighting for what is right.

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

Continue to do what I'm already doing. Being an example of reconciliation, having honest and truthful conversations with people. Joining efforts with other groups to create collective impact. Continue to speak out against these issues. Taking a hard stance against racism and the many disparities that affect our communities and actively working at changing policy. The disparities in our communities will change and be affected when YOU start to change!

Chris Praedel - Candidate for City Commissioner



Introduction: I am married, a father of three, and serve full-time as a nonprofit executive director in the housing sector (Community Homeworks). I served since 2019 as a Kalamazoo City Commission, and remained active in the community during that time, serving on the board of the Kalamazoo Literacy Council over a ten-year period, 41st District Service Office (DSO), and more recently on the El Concilio Campaign Cabinet.

Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor?

Why or why not? Please give an example.

Absolutely, yes! As an example, we elicited an independent citywide staff DEI culture assessment and study, conducted by the Michigan Public Health Institute (MPHI) in spring 2022. Employees told us that previous lived experiences indicated a high level of skepticism (81% of respondents) of the commitment to DEI work within the city based on renewed efforts and the new office created. I think this high skepticism is shared by many members of the community. The MPHI independent report indicated numerous findings, including a lack of standardized protocols and coordination into one organization-wide DEI strategy, lack of psychological safety for BIPOC and women employees, and work culture that centers the experiences and background of men. These findings are unacceptable and must change. From the top down, our cultural norms must change in meaningful ways that do not simply check boxes or come and go with whoever is elected or appointed.

We also know our community has high expectations that we continue to keep DEI&B work center to all we do and creating an anti-racist organization. Our high expectations are critical at this juncture. With the high level of skepticism from decades of idleness, it is vital we demonstrate that we provide meaningful and ongoing time and resources to this work at all levels. I am glad it is now enshrined in law that our DEI office is a permanent fixture of the way we do business as a municipality.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

Historically underrepresented, especially BIPOC communities, continue to experience significant disparities and gaps in homeownership, employment, wages, wealth, and representation in positions of power. Each of these disparities has deep roots in racism and white supremacy.

I try to align with organizations that approach systems-change, in organizations such as Kalamazoo Literacy Council, which takes a 2-gen approach to the work they do to support multigenerational needs.

In my role as a nonprofit executive at Community Homeworks, we work at keeping people in their existing homes and retaining equity value in homes and maintaining or growing intergeneration wealth and housing stability.

On City Commission, we have tackled antiquated zoning and updated our code of ordinances to be more equitable, one instance caused us to be attacked on national television for standing up for what we believe in. We passed a Housing Discrimination Ordinance, created a Civil Rights Board, conducted an independent investigation on policing practices and addressed all 41 recommendations, we continue to examine ways to focus on and prioritize BIPOC and women owned small businesses and entrepreneurs. We also recently posted an RFP for the soon to be launched Cannabis Chamber, which devotes by law, 25% of all revenue generated to equity initiatives to invest in communities disproportionately impacted by drug laws. We also are continuing to improve homeownership rates with down payment assistance and other homeownership resources. We also voted to make our DEI office a permanent fixture by law, instead of just a budget line.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

After college, I signed up to serve a two-year national service stint as a third-grade teacher in South Chicago and did my student teaching in Los Angeles. The things I witnessed regarding the inequities of the education system really opened my eyes early in my career, such as deteriorating schools in low-income districts compared to affluent ones, significant class sizes with large populations with learning disabilities, and a lottery system to access the higher quality educational opportunities.

By eighth grade, kids in the district had to select a career path and entered a lottery system to get placed in a higher performing high school. This required either heavily involved school staff or parents to enter the lotteries for numerous schools. You could see the despair in the eyes of parents when their kids were not one of those randomly selected, even when they did everything they could. The system was stacked against families so early in life.

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

In both my public, private and professional career in the last four years, I have invested in dozens of opportunities to learn and grow through a DEI lens both in group settings and as an individual. I plan to continue to do so throughout the rest of my life.

I am also committed to seeing us continue to commit to the ten (10) MPHI recommendations outlined in their independent report. I think these ten (10) recommendations outline a path forward that we can and must continue to work on and invest in.

I also strive to remain present throughout the community and in all neighborhoods to better understand and hear directly from residents about their perspective and greatest needs.

Meaningful presence in spaces and places is vital to decrease disparities because it provides a necessary lens to make decisions and prioritize resources. The "for us, by us" mindset should really center much of our work. We need to do a better job of it.

Alonzo Wilson II - Candidate for City Commissioner

I'm 32 years old, married and father to two young boys. Proud Kalamazoo native, Kalamazoo Promise scholarship recipient, University of Michigan graduate, and currently a project controls engineer with CSM Group.



Is it important to address Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues as a City Commissioner/Mayor?

Why or why not? Please give an example.

It is crucial for elected City officials to address DEI issue as our primary job is representing the diverse range of people who make up our communities. To address the issue issues plaguing our city, we must fully understand them from all perspectives. To acquire this full perspective, elected officials must seek input from members of the community who've experienced inequality or discrimination. By communicating directly with such residents, city officials gain a better understanding of what responses and resources are required to address DEI issues. This collaboration also promotes more citizen engagement among marginalized groups, empowering them by making their voices and needs feel heard by their local government.

An example of this practice would be forming an independent commission of local representatives and volunteers from the public to assess community submitted DEI issues, and to recommend feasible solutions.

In the city of Kalamazoo, describe the challenges faced by historically underrepresented communities. What strategies have you used to address these challenges as an incumbent or community member, and how successful were those strategies?

Systemic racism has resulted in significant inequities for underrepresented communities in Kalamazoo. Historically, these communities have been denied equal access to quality housing, education, healthcare, and jobs. This has led to increased rates of poverty, homelessness, and mortality for members of underrepresented communities. As this would be my first term as an elected official, I have not yet implemented any city-wide solutions to address these issues. If elected, here are the strategies I would use to help alleviate the impact of systemic racism on these communities.

I would increase awareness and visibility through programs and events targeted towards celebrating these cultures and educating those who may be ignorant. I'd partner with leaders from each community to understand their concerns and collaborate to devise a plan of action together! Racism and bigotry can be derived from a person's lack of understanding and perceived fears. Removing this misunderstanding would help cure the systemic racism that plagues our city.

Additionally, I would create programs aimed at increasing housing and career opportunities for these underrepresented communities. To address the shortage of affordable housing, I would use my office to help reform local zoning rules and other regulations that constrain the amount of new housing construction. I would also do my best to expedite approval of new developments that meet zoning laws. To promote equity in our economy, I would recommend programs to provide resources to entrepreneurs from these communities looking to grow their small businesses.

Describe the most challenging situation dealing with DEI that you have personally faced or witnessed. How did you respond to the situation?

One of my earliest and most memorable situations dealing with DEI happened during my Senior year of high school. After working hard in advanced courses, overcoming the social awkwardness of being one of few black children in most classrooms, I had the privilege of earning acceptance into the University of Michigan. Overcome with joy, I shared the great news with my AP Government teacher. Upon receipt of this information, my teacher responded by telling me that I "only got accepted because of Affirmative Action". I was heartbroken that someone could feel this way towards me, especially an educator that I once revered. It was at this point that I realized the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

I understood that Affirmative Action was enacted to combat the inequities caused by systemic racism, so I didn't let this conversation break my spirit. I went on to graduate from high school with honors and then the University of Michigan with a B.S.E. in Industrial and Operations Engineering. I knew that I worked just as hard as my peers, if not harder, and deserved my degree.

It is dangerous beliefs like that of my high school AP Government that can diminish one's achievements and exclude underrepresented communities from accessing growth opportunities. DEI programs aimed at increasing representation from these communities are essential for our city to become prosperous for all people.

If elected, what major investment (time and energy) in racial equity do you plan to make for the upcoming term in your position? How will this investment decrease disparities in Kalamazoo?

If elected, I will invest a significant amount of time and energy into developing racial equity solutions in my upcoming term. I intend to support initiatives that increase the availability of affordable housing. I will also support programs that encourage the development of small businesses from underrepresented communities. This investment will provide more families with the stability at home that is required for any individual to be successful in this world and begin to decrease racial disparities in Kalamazoo.