

MOST INFLUENTIAL

ASJ founders continuing the fight for change

Cofounders Nicole LeGrand, Tamara Marcus and Leslie Neely voted to CBJ's Most Influential list

By Jennie Morton

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In a year of unrelenting change, three Cedar Rapids women saw an opportunity to marshal conversations around the Black Lives Matter movement, and funneled that energy into a grassroots group that has already achieved change.

Nicole LeGrand, Tamara Marcus and Leslie Neely form the foundational trio of Advocates for Social Justice, a new nonprofit first envisioned during a June protest over the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25. The group was able to draw more than 2,000 people to downtown Cedar Rapids, and ultimately delivered a letter demanding several local reforms to city leaders.

What started as a single protest has crystallized into an organization dedicated to community transformation – earning Ms. LeGrand, Ms. Marcus and Ms. Neely their first appearances on the CBJ's reader-voted list of the Most Influential Leaders in the Corridor. (See the full list on page 6.)

"This is one of the most diverse organizations I've ever been a part of. We have this



Leslie Neely, one of the founders of Cedar Rapids-based Advocates for Social Justice, stands in front of a memorial mural to George Floyd at the site of his death in Minneapolis. PHOTO LESLIE NEELY

beautiful blend of backgrounds and skills," explained Ms. Marcus. "If one of us had tried to do this alone, it wouldn't have worked the way it did. But there is strength when you find an intersectionality of causes."

Much like starting a business, forming

a nonprofit has been an unexpected but awe-inspiring rollercoaster, they say. Each cofounder brings a unique background to the team: Ms. Neely's pursuit of a business degree and her participation on her employer Toyota's Racial Justice Action Committee;

Ms. Marcus as a Ph.D. candidate in natural resources and earth system sciences, and the sustainability manager for the city of Cedar Rapids; and Ms. LeGrand's entrepreneurial spirit as the owner of Pretty Junk.

Chief among ASJ's priorities in 2020 was the establishment of a Citizens Review Board, "a formal entity comprising community members, which serves as an independent authority to monitor local policing." The goal is to have citizen accountability for law enforcement actions, especially those that disproportionately affect Cedar Rapids residents of color.

This proposal was paired with other systemic changes such as banning chokeholds, stricter body camera provisions and revoking qualified immunity, which protects officers from individual liability. These provisions were directly translated from the summer's protests into action items proposed to city leadership.

On Oct. 20, the city council finally approved a first step toward creating a review board centered around three key focuses: public engagement; recommending training, policy and procedures; and reviewing

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complaints. That fell short of the more active role ASJ leaders had hoped for, but represented progress nonetheless, they said.

“We had no idea what the protests would lead to, but thousands of people turned out to have their voices heard,” Ms. LeGrand said. “For anyone who thinks ‘I’m just one person,’ we stepped up to do something small and now that’s become larger than any one of us.”

ASJ is now broadening its reach as part of its mission to fight for social and economic justice. It has coordinated a number of donation drives this year for winter coats, backpacks with school supplies and essential supplies after the derecho. It is also a food pantry partner with local non-profit Matthew 25.

Additionally, ASJ spearheaded several voting awareness campaigns and election events, especially Coe Votes for college students. The group received positive feedback about its efforts, particularly its initiative for free Uber rides to the polls, which was replicated by the Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement in Des Moines.

“We want people to understand that police reform and helping the disenfranchised go hand in hand – they both disproportionately affect minorities,” Ms. Neely stressed.

“There are immediate needs we can serve right now,” added Ms. Marcus. “Policy changes take time to write and enact. Even with an aggressive six-month Citizen Review Board implementation, it could take a year or two to really feel the difference. That’s why ASJ is matching long-term policy work with community support that benefits people today.”

The group already has its sights on making strides in 2021 and beyond. In addition to formalizing its board structure, it will connect with other statewide groups working on the same issues in their communities.

Among ASJ’s members are community leaders such as Linn County Supervisor Stacey Walker (also a member of this year’s Most Influential list), Cedar Rapids Community School District school board member Nancy Humbles, and surgeon Dr. Vincent Reid. The group also includes many business leaders.

“We are so proud of creating something that brought our community together in a turbulent year. We saw Cedar Rapids show up in a way we’ve never seen before. And we’re excited to keep that energy and passion at the forefront,” Ms. Neely said.

“While it’s been a rollercoaster of a year, the progress that has been made and how we responded as a group has been constructive. You have to build while you dismantle,” Ms. Marcus added.



TOP: ASJ cofounder Tamara Marcus joins marchers in downtown Cedar Rapids in June. LEFT: Founders Tamara Marcus, Nicole LeGrand and Leslie Neely stand with supporters Paul Kongshaug (left) and Chuck Crawley (right). PHOTOS ASJ

This is especially important for three individuals who never dreamed of launching and running an organization, especially during a pandemic.

“This type of advocacy work has a lot of moving parts, so we’ve quickly learned how to communicate, balance schedules and delegate,” Ms. LeGrand said. “Especially as we expand the organization with

new people, we know we’ll always be learning as we go.”

Where can you use your own influence? The ASJ leaders recommend finding ways to support black- and brown-owned businesses and startups. Lending time, resources and connections are a meaningful way to support the livelihoods of minority entrepreneurs, they say. **CBJ**

2020's Most Influential Leaders

- 1. Nick AbouAssaly** - Mayor, City of Marion
- 2. Tamara Marcus** - Founder, Advocates for Social Justice
- 3. Nicole LeGrand** - Founder, Advocates for Social Justice
- 4. Stacey Walker** - Supervisor, Linn County
- 5. Leslie Neely** - Founder, Advocates for Social Justice
- 6. Beth Malicki** - News Anchor, KCRG-TV9
- 7. Steve Shriver** - Co-Founder and CEO, Eco Lips
- 8. Eric Engelmann** - General Partner, ISA Ventures
- 9. Brad Hart** - Mayor, City of Cedar Rapids
- 10. Royceann Porter** - Supervisor, Johnson County
- 11. Duane Smith** - Executive Chairman, TrueNorth Companies
- 12. Jason Smith** - President & CEO, TrueNorth Companies
- 13. Willie Ray Fairley** - Owner, Willie Ray's Q Shack, Cedar Rapids
- 14. Tom Cilek** - Senior Vice President, West Bank
- 15. Jack Evans** - Chairman, Hall-Perrine Foundation
- 16. Bruce Harreld** - President, University of Iowa
- 17. Anthony Arrington** - Managing Partner, Top RANK
- 18. Kirk Ferentz** - Head Football Coach, University of Iowa
- 19. Bruce Teague** - Mayor, City of Iowa City
- 20. Abby Finkenauer** - U.S. Representative, State of Iowa
- 21. Larry Helling** - CEO, QCR Holdings
- 22. Lura McBride** - President & CEO, Van Meter Inc.
- 23. Doug Neumann** - Executive Director,
Cedar Rapids Metro Economic Alliance
- 24. Jeff Pomerantz** - City Manager, City of Cedar Rapids
- 25. Randy Ramlo** - President & CEO, UFG Insurance

About the CBJ's Most Influential list

The CBJ's Most Influential list recognizes the people who have made the biggest mark on the Corridor within the past year, whether through their leadership, business accomplishments or philanthropic efforts. CBJ this summer asked readers to cast their votes for the Corridor's most influential business leaders, and then tallied those votes to build our final list of the top 25.