



# Hometown Heroes

Not all heroes wear capes, some wear aprons, scrubs or uniforms. These past two years have been challenging for all of us, but especially challenging for those in healthcare and those on the frontlines of providing products and services we need.

These heroes have selflessly served their community and we cannot be more proud they are a part of our growing circle of CARE.

## COMMUNITY HEROES



### KATHI HARRIS

**Founder, PROACTIVE; Founder and Executive Director, The Proactive Project, Inc.**

Kathi Harris is a community activist and founder of PROACTIVE (People Reaching Out Advocating in the Community Together Increasing Voter Empowerment), a non-partisan coalition of community organizations and churches to get the vote out for the general election established in 2004. Over the years, PROACTIVE has coordinated many volunteers to register, educate, and mobilize the community on get-out-the-vote efforts and continues to monitor the election process and protect the purity of the process.

In 2020, The PROACTIVE Project, Inc. was formed, and Kathi was named executive director of this non-profit organization. Its mission, vision and goals are to provide social and economic progress for minorities, low income, and underrepresented, underserved and working people. Since its inception, The PROACTIVE Project, Inc. has taken on several projects such as education in the community about COVID-19, skilled trades apprenticeship programs and voting rights for those that are in the criminal justice system.

Kathi is a life member of the NAACP, president of the Grand Rapids Chapter of A. Philip Randolph Institute. She is also coordinator of the Black Men in Union: North Meets South Conference; coordinator for the City of Grand Rapids Participatory Budgeting Project and a member of Redeemed Baptist Church. She is a single mother of one son and one grandson.



### LORENZO BRADSHAW

**Principal, Brookwood Elementary School, Kentwood Public Schools**

Lorenzo A. Bradshaw is the principal of Brookwood Elementary. He has devoted the past 18 years of his career as a teacher, trainer, mentor, child advocate and administrator. His life has been committed to serving youth, families and the community. Lorenzo has worked in partnership with other organizations using his platform and voice to educate others on facts and myths regarding vaccinations, booster shots and testing. He secured and distributed PPE throughout the 45907 zip code area and hosted multiple testing and vaccination sites, with specific emphasis on the Southeast side of Grand Rapids.

Lorenzo spends his leisure time studying educational practices all over the world. Recently, Lorenzo participated in a Fellowship that afforded him to study in several Asian countries. He has visited the Caribbean Islands, Canada, China, Africa, Korea and 41 of the 50 states in the U.S. He enjoys collecting art from across the world, cooking, reading, and working out. He loves God and has served at Pilgrim Rest Missionary Baptist Church as a youth leader. He serves as a volunteer for Big Brothers Big Sisters. He is also a proud member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. Grand Rapids Alumni Chapter.

Lorenzo is a graduate of Ottawa Hills High School and Grand Rapids Community College. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Johnson C. Smith University and his Master of Arts from Western Michigan University.



# Hometown Heroes

## COMMUNITY HEROES



### REV. KHARY BRIDGEWATER

**Cofounder and Managing Director of Norstell Capital, LLC; Director of Inspire Equity Foundation**

Rev. Khary Bridgewater is co-founder and managing director of Norstell Capital, LLC and director of the Inspire Equity Foundation. He also supervises the Kent County Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships Team.

Khary served as senior program officer at RDV Corporation, working in philanthropy with urban churches in Grand Rapids. He has held multiple ministry roles with local churches in Grand Rapids, having served as pastor of Congregational Life at Grace CRC and interim pastor at Messiah Missionary Baptist Church.

Khary has also been an Adjunct Professor at the Cornerstone University's Grand Rapids Theological Seminary. He is currently the vice chair of Our Daily Bread Ministries.

An alum of Boston University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Khary is an expert in design thinking and systems dynamics with publications in academic journals.



### CLE JACKSON

**President, Greater Grand Rapids NAACP**

Cle J. Jackson is a native of Grand Rapids, Mich. and serves as president of the Greater Grand Rapids NAACP (NAACPGR). He is employed with a national healthcare organization where he has oversight for 22 counties in the West Michigan region and is responsible for community and civic relations.

Cle led NAACPGR in hosting COVID-19 Uncovered, a weekly livestream series held for 10 weeks. The COVID-19 Uncovered series was an interactive discussion with community leaders from Grand Rapids and all over the country educating the community on the importance of all things COVID-19, including: testing, vaccinations, disparities in positivity rates and much more. NAACPGR, in partnership with the Grand Rapids Center for Community Transformation, Cherry Health, Metro Health, YMCA and Feeding America of West, successfully facilitated 5 COVID-19 Relief Givebacks during 2020-2021. With this collaborative effort, they also provided vaccinations and testing at a majority of the events. At each distribution, 50+ pounds of groceries and cleaning/hygiene supply packages were provided to 250+ families in the local community.

In response to overwhelming requests, NAACPGR partnered with United Way, Kent County and the Black Impact Collaborative to distribute over \$70,000 in direct support to over 70 families located in the 49507 zip code and surrounding areas. Based on 244 responses from the community, the top three areas of need were rent, utilities and technology. Over 70% of the families who received assistance resided in the 49507 zip code and were African American in the age range of 17-60 years old.

Cle has received numerous civic awards and citations over the years, including the 2012 Eugene Browning Medical Service award and the 2016 Whitney M. Young, Jr. Service Award, the highest national service award given by the Boy Scouts of America. He also received the Giants award.

# Hometown Heroes



## GOVERNMENT HEROES



### **BRIAN HARTL**

#### **Director, Center for Community Health Strategy, Kent County Health Department**

Brian Hartl has been an Epidemiologist with the Kent County Health Department since 2003 where he served the majority of his career as the supervisor of the Communicable Disease and Epidemiology Unit. In January 2020, Brian became the director for KCHD's Center for Community Health Strategy with a focus on strengthening partnerships to collectively improve the health of those who call Kent County Home.

Brian coordinated KCHD's case investigation and contact tracing efforts as well as the provision of COVID-19 data on cases and vaccines to the Kent County community. He also coordinated the Community COVID-19 Vaccine Planning workgroup to ensure vaccination needs were met for those disproportionately impacted by COVID or have challenges with accessing mass vaccination sites and directed KCHD's efforts to establish neighborhood vaccination clinics through partnerships with community-based organizations. Brian also successfully wrote a grant to bring 10,000 doses of vaccine (5,000 two-dose vaccine series) to Kent County during the early phases of the vaccine roll out when supply was scarce. These vaccines were distributed to clinic sites serving populations who were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. He successfully wrote another grant to bring \$2 million in funding from the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a network of community health navigators embedded in four community-based organizations to increase access to culturally and linguistically appropriate COVID-19 educational materials and establish neighborhood vaccination sites to increase vaccination rates and reduce infection rates in Kent County's racial and ethnic populations.

Brian obtained a Bachelor of Science in chemical engineering and a Master of Public Health in general epidemiology from the University of Michigan.



### **TERESA BRANSON**

#### **Chief Inclusion Officer, Kent County**

Teresa is the chief inclusion officer for Kent County. Teresa is responsible for providing leadership, direction and support for Kent County's diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives across Kent County's 25 Departments, helping to carry out strategic goals related to inclusive participation in the Kent County Strategic Plan and being responsive to community needs, concerns and interest to help advance DEI efforts in Kent County.

Teresa served as the deputy incident commander for Kent County Health Department's COVID-19 Incident Command Team and chaired the Kent County COVID-19 Race, Equity, and Inclusion Team to address disparities and increase vaccinations through community partner engagement, outreach and communications. She also chaired the Ethics & Health Equity Advisory Team for the West Michigan Vaccine Clinic at DeVos Place. Teresa met with pastors and community leaders to facilitate the timely receipt of COVID-19 updates, data and information providing leadership support to the Kent County

Faith-Based Leaders & Neighborhood Partnership Team; provided advocacy to get pastors vaccinated, and provided team support for community vaccinations through resources and canvassing as part of the Shots of Love Campaign. Teresa also served on the Michigan COVID-19 Community Action Team, Centering Equity Work Team, and Testing Infrastructure Team of the Governor's Task Force on Racial Disparities

Teresa has a Bachelor of Science from Central Michigan University in public health education/health promotion and a Master of Health Administration with a concentration in health care services and management from Grand Valley State University. Teresa is a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. and Pi Alpha Alpha National Honor Society for Public Affairs and Administration. Teresa is currently pursuing a Diversity and Inclusion certification from Cornell University.



# Hometown Heroes

## GOVERNMENT HEROES



### COMM. ROBERT WOMACK

#### Kent County Commissioner

Commissioner Robert S. Womack is a three term Kent County Commissioner and a life- long civil rights activist. He is co-chair of Governor Gretchen Whitmer's Black Leadership Advisory Council. He is the first American hip hop artist to be elected to office in the United States.

Robert anchors the longest continuous African American radio talk show in Michigan, "The Pulse of the City," founded in 2001 to address racial disparities in Grand Rapids, Mich. He is an advocate for better police and community relations. He has helped more minority businesses receive grant in the history of Kent County via his position on the Cares Act Committee and by partnering with the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce.

During the pandemic, Robert suggested to the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce that they help do grant writing clinics at the urban radio stations. He successfully negotiated for Spanish and other language translators for Kent County board meetings. He leads by example and embraces bi-partisan co-operative government for the sake of providing first class services to the community which voted him into office.

Robert was the first commissioner to run on the environmental issue "Get the Lead Out" in Kent County. A true and proud Democrat that carries the torch, "Power to the People, by the People, for the People!"



### MARGO SCHLEWITZ

#### Manager, Community Health Center, University of Michigan Health-West

Manager of University of Michigan Health-West Community Health Center, Margo has over 30 years of experience in healthcare leadership serving in the areas of HIV/AIDS care, substance abuse treatment and physician practice management.

Margo implemented a free COVID-19 testing program at the Community Health Center that has operated five days a week since the Spring of 2020. Over 6,000 tests have been performed. She also oversaw the first University of Michigan Health-West site to provide COVID-19 vaccines outside of the hospital with the specific goal of targeting underrepresented community groups. Through outreach to various community representatives, the site has provided over 6,500 vaccines in three months to members of Asian, African American and Latino community's working evenings and weekends. As of March 21, 2022, the location has given over 9,400 doses of vaccines. Margo continues to organize and manage COVID-19 vaccine clinics at schools and through partnership with GRAAHI.

Margo and her husband served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Guatemala for almost four years and she has served in many capacities on the Board of Directors of Healthnet of West Michigan. She is a fierce advocate for vulnerable populations with the goal to reduce health disparities. Margo holds a Master of Science in healthcare administration from The New School University and a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Kansas.

# Hometown Heroes

## HEALTHCARE HEROES



### DR. TALAWNDA BRAGG

#### **Internal Medicine Hospitalist, Spectrum Health Medical Group**

TaLawnda L. Bragg, MD, FACP is an internal medicine hospitalist with the Spectrum Health Medical Group and the program director for the Spectrum Health/Michigan State University College of Human Medicine Internal Medicine Residency Program. She is an associate clinical professor in the Department of Medicine at Michigan State University's College of Human Medicine. TaLawnda worked in acute care as a frontline physician and served as community leader and outreach volunteer focusing on COVID-19 education, prevention, and vaccination efforts. She has been a recurring expert panelist and speaker for community organizations engaged in the fight against COVID-19 and an advocate for increasing access to care and health literacy amongst communities of color.

TaLawnda was born and raised in Inkster, Mich. and now resides in West Michigan with her husband Elder Sidney C. Bragg, Jr. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Biomedical Science from Grand Valley State University. She went on to complete her Doctor of Medicine at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine. TaLawnda completed internal medicine residency training in Grand Rapids with Grand Rapids Medical Education Center/MSU. She's practiced medicine in Grand Rapids for over 15 years and takes pride in helping train the next generation of physicians. She has special interests and leadership experience in resident and medical student education, faculty development, diversity, equity and inclusion, quality and improvement, healthcare governance, community engagement and health advocacy.



### DR. LISA LOWERY

#### **Section Chief, Adolescent Medicine Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, Spectrum Health**

Dr. Lisa M. Lowery, a Grand Rapids, Mich. native, is the Section Chief of Adolescent Medicine and an Associate Program Director for the Combined Internal Medicine/Pediatrics Residency Program. She is an Associate Professor at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine Department of Pediatrics and Human Development. In April 2020, she started at Michigan State University College of Human Medicine as the Assistant Dean for Diversity and Cultural Initiatives.

Lisa has participated in several townhalls and panels educating the African American Community on COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccination. She continues to encourage vaccination and is currently a member of the Grand Rapids Black Vaccination Community Resource Committee-West Michigan National Infrastructure for Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 within Racial and Ethnic Minority Communities (West MI NNICE).

Lisa is president of the West Michigan Medical Society/National Medical Association and serves on the Urban League of West Michigan Board of Directors, the Cherry Health Foundation Board, Wedgewood Christian Services Board of Directors and Grand Rapids LGBTQ Health Consortium Board of Directors.

Lisa received her Bachelor of Science in microbiology with Honors from Michigan State University. She received her medical degree from the University of Michigan Medical School. She completed a combined Internal Medicine and Pediatric Residency program at Spectrum Health-Butterworth Michigan State University/Grand Rapids Campus. Lisa completed a subspecialty fellowship in Adolescent Medicine at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Md. While at the Johns Hopkins, she obtained a Master of Public Health in the Department of Population and Family Health Sciences with a certificate of concentration in maternal and child health.

# Hometown Heroes

## HEALTHCARE HEROES



### LIBERTY JACQUES

**Director of Infection Prevention and Control, Mercy Health West Michigan**

As director of infection prevention and control for Mercy Health West Michigan, Liberty R. Jacques developed and co-led the COVID-19 service line focused on leading and innovating within the community in four key areas: clinical care and quality; comprehensive testing strategy; colleague and provider health and safety; and equitable and efficient vaccination distribution. Liberty has led efforts to design innovative outpatient testing centers, including collaborating with area laboratories to validate saliva PCR testing. She has also established and managed colleague COVID vaccination efforts and transitioned this into patient vaccination clinics including a mass vaccination clinic, a drive-thru clinic as well as embedded clinics within physician offices to meet patients where they are comfortable receiving care. Liberty has collaborated with community and healthcare leaders to engage vulnerable populations in vaccination and achieved high rates of vaccination in areas of high social vulnerability indices.

Liberty obtained her Bachelor of Science in nursing from Grand Valley State University, her Master of Science in nursing from the University of Cincinnati and her Doctor of Nursing Practice with an emphasis in infection prevention from Loyola University Chicago. Liberty is certified as a Lean Six Sigma Green Belt and has a passion for improving processes to optimize patient and colleague safety.



### AUNDREA ROBINSON

**President, Grand Rapids Chapter National Black Nurses Association**

Aundrea Robinson is the current president of the Grand Rapids Chapter of the National Black Nurses Association and locally recognized as a leader in the field of nursing and health systems administration. In Grand Rapids, she has worked as an emergency room nurse at St. Mary's Hospital and as a nurse for the State of Michigan and volunteers with the Grand Rapids Black Nurses Association as president of the nonprofit that represents more than 75 local nurses. GRBNA provides education and services to Grand Rapids and Kent County residents to improve health equity.

Aundrea helped the organization secure a \$50,000 grant to provide scholarships and a mentor program for aspiring nurses who want to work in local hospitals. The Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Scholarship and Mentorship program, or IDEAS, provides scholarships, professional development, and mentorship to minority nursing students to increase the presence and retention of nurses of color in the hospital setting.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, GRBNA responded with the Your Are Not Alone phone contact program that provided care packages and regular "check-in" calls to local senior citizens and residents with disabilities. GRBNA also collaborated with the Kent County Health Department to provide COVID-19 vaccinations on-site at local housing complexes for the elderly and disabled. GRBNA continues to provide education, health screenings and a variety of other services in the Kent County area to improve the health of underserved communities.

Aundrea is a graduate of the Ferris State University School of Nursing Bachelor of Science program and is currently a master's degree candidate. Robinson also has a Bachelor of Science in health care and business administration from Grand Valley State University.





## DR. KAREN KENNEDY

### Primary Care Regional Medical Director, Mercy Health Physician Partners

Dr. Karen Marshelia Kennedy is a health enthusiast, sports supporter, patient advocate and wellness cheerleader - all this even before she became the doctor she is today. She is a board-certified Family Medicine physician. Karen is the primary care regional medical director with Mercy Health Physician Partners and serves as lead physician in one of their direct-to-employer medical sites with Lacks Enterprises Primary Care.

Karen provided front-line patient care early in the COVID pandemic and was instrumental in the planning, strategy, and execution of patient COVID vaccinations in the MHPP Clinica Santa Maria and Browning Claytor offices. She also partnered with Mercy Health Grand Rapids Chief Officers and Infectious Disease physicians in a large media conference addressing at risk, vulnerable populations and numerous other educational media including one for the American Heart Association's Faith In Heart initiative.

Karen assumed lead physician role of an innovative direct-to-employer office named Lacks Primary Care, thereby providing COVID testing and treatment to Lacks diverse panel of employees via Mercy Health's partnership. She was also appointed MHPP's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Champion and utilized the platform to promote education, provide thought leadership, and effectuate DEI organizational goals.

Ever the community advocate, Karen is active in various speaking engagements and community events. She is also proud to serve as MHPP Diversity and Inclusion Champion alongside a team of dedicated leaders across West Michigan.

Karen earned a degree from Upstate Medical School in Syracuse, N.Y. and her Doctor of Medicine from the UMDNJ Robert Wood Johnson Family Medicine Residency program in New Brunswick, N.J. She is also working towards a fellowship as a current member of the American College of Healthcare Executives.



## MELISSA KAMARA LIGGINS

### Senior Director, Inclusive Communications, Beaumont Health, Spectrum Health

Melissa Kamara Liggins serves a dual role as sr. director, marketing and communications for Spectrum Health Lakeland and sr. director, inclusive communications for Beaumont Health Spectrum Health. As an experienced communications leader and strategist, Melissa has led regional- and enterprise-level marketing communication campaigns and community partnerships aimed at promoting services and supporting the system's mission, vision, and values. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Melissa lead communication efforts to reach communities disproportionately impacted by the disease. Working with community members and partners, like GRAAHI, Melissa drove for the co-creation of health messages and conversations that were timely, culturally sensitive and relevant.

Through public service announcements, livestreamed panel discussions, 1x1 interviews with community members, Melissa turned Spectrum Health communication platforms into community-centered platforms and an opportunity, through dialogue, to discuss the facts of COVID-19 and explore COVID-19's impact on Black, Hispanic, Asian, faith, disabled and rural communities and cultures. Melissa also led communications to support Spectrum Health's community partnership COVID-19 vaccination clinics at New Hope Baptist Church and Cesar Chavez Elementary School. And, she served on the Community Foundation of the Holland/Zeeland Area's Vaccine Equity Re-granting Committee to support and advance equitable vaccine distribution through a partnership with Michigan State University and the National Network to Innovate for COVID-19 and Adult Vaccine Equity.

In her healthcare career, Melissa has led community relations, public relations, issues management and media relations teams, as well as executive, Board and CEO communications. For over a decade, Melissa has served as a hospital spokesperson and is a FEMA-trained public information officer. Melissa has excelled in developing strategies to elevate brand through media and community engagement; internal, executive, and digital communications; and reputation management.

## HEALTHCARE HEROES

# Hometown Heroes



### NASTACIEA ROBERT

#### **Director of Contact Center & Access Services Operations, Spectrum Health Hospitals**

Nastacia Robert is the director of contact center and access services operations for Spectrum Health Hospitals. She is responsible for connecting the local community to clinical networks when the community needs healthcare the most. She helped create sustainable neighborhood-based clinics during initial COVID-19 vaccine distribution within local high-risk communities. When vaccination was scarce, Nastacia secured vaccines for all Spectrum Health neighborhood clinics to ensure equitable distribution to high-risk populations. She created an inviting environment in safe locations such as churches, senior living centers and schools. The locations offered multiple interventions, including partnerships with YMCA veggie van to offer fresh fruits and recipes, healthier community services, diabetes management, financial counseling services and preventive scheduling services to offer primary care services to close gaps in care during critical times. Nastacia also leveraged community partnerships to customize care through culture and community.

Nastacia helped launch Spectrum Health's first African American inclusion resource group, assisted with the development of its first cultural awareness mentoring program, SHAARE2GROW, and the first CFO Diversity Mentorship Program mapping a cohort of diverse professionals to talented middle management and C-Suite leaders.

Nastacia attained her Bachelor of Science in healthcare administration from Davenport University and later received her Master in Public Administration, with dual emphasis in healthcare administration and non-profit management and leadership, from Grand Valley State University. She holds a CRCR certification from HFMA and two certifications in Unconscious Your Bias from the Cultural Intelligence Center.



### VALISA ARMSTEAD

#### **Director, Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Beaumont Health Spectrum Health**

Valissa Armstead is the director, diversity, equity and inclusion for Beaumont Health Spectrum Health. Valissa is responsible for ensuring the strategic alignment of DEI to BSHS strategies. Her work in the community, with a particular focus on serving and impacting the community during COVID-19, extends to her personal passion for community. She is a member of the Grand Rapids Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and serves as chair of the Physical and Mental Health Committee.

Valissa helped ensure decisions for managing the pandemic were culturally relevant and did not unintentionally cause harm to any diverse people group. She established and co-led Spectrum Health's Community Vaccination Pop Up Clinics. The clinics focused on areas hardest hit by COVID-19 in underserved communities, which included people of color, low-income populations, and people who experienced barriers to transportation. Valissa also assisted with an identified language barrier impacting patient engagement with Spectrum Health's virtual waiting room for COVID-19 appointments, leading to a bilingual function being added to offer non-English speakers the ability to communicate arrival at various locations across West Michigan. She also partnered with other Black Greek letter organizations in canvassing neighborhoods to ensure awareness of the vaccine and locations to where vaccination services were offered.

A native of Flint, Mich., Valissa earned a Bachelor of Science in industrial engineering, a Master in Business Administration and a Doctorate in Management as she completes her research in organizational leadership with specific focus on DEI. She is a Certified Diversity Practitioner through the National Diversity Council, a Certified Unconscious Bias Facilitator, and a Certified Cultural Intelligence Facilitator from the Cultural Intelligence Center. She is completing additional studies with the Leadership Disparities Program at Massachusetts General Hospital.



# Hometown Heroes

## HEALTHCARE HEROES



### TASHA BLACKMON

#### **President and Chief Executive Officer, Cherry Health**

Born and raised in Grand Rapids, Mich., Tasha Blackmon is a dynamic, collaborative leader, mentor and coach who brings more than 20 years of business operations experience to her role as president and chief executive officer of Michigan's largest Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC). Cherry Health provides integrated health care services to over 55,000 patients in Barry, Kent, Montcalm, Muskegon, Ottawa and Wayne counties.

During her 16 years with Cherry Health, Blackmon has championed health justice through aggressively disrupting healthcare disparities. Her experience comes from an operational perspective, having established high standards of care utilizing a health equity lens to treat an individual's health needs holistically rather than symptomatically. She has led numerous large-scale expansion and development projects and held six positions within Cherry Health before becoming CEO in 2018. As an accomplished and mission-minded leader, it is imperative to Tasha that our community is healthier, one patient at a time.

An eloquent and inspiring speaker, Tasha has a way of being heard on behalf of those who do not have voices and those whose voices have been silenced because of the barriers they face. She is passionate and personally driven to ensure that all patients served in her home community and surrounding areas receive the highest quality of care.

Tasha received her Bachelor of Science from Michigan State University and her Master of Business Administration from Cornerstone University. She has also completed an executive fellowship with the University of Kansas Medical Center.

“ So when you feel like hope is gone,  
look inside you and be strong and  
you'll finally see the truth, that a hero  
lies in you. ”

- Hero, Maria Carey