

Portraits of Us:

A Book of Essays Centering Black
Women Leading Philanthropy

Edited By Toya Nash Randall
Curator and Catalyst
Voice. Vision. Value.





Minneapolis—
St. Paul, MN

We Define Our Roles

Ebony Aya, Author

Awa Mally, Photographer

On Wednesday, May 4, 2022, nearly 40 Black women gathered at the Brick and Mortar, a speakeasy located in downtown Minneapolis, Minnesota. Exposed brick, hardwood

tables, and tall ceilings helped to create the ambiance that was needed for that evening; the opened rooftop a sign that spring was finally here after such a long winter, the embracing and levity in the space a signal that just maybe the worst of COVID was behind us.

In that room, as the Black women who were present shared exchanges over food and wine, they also came forward to share their personal stories which depicted how they have exercised leadership in philanthropy. Those present ranged from Presidents of some of the largest community foundations in the region, to those newly employed as administrative assistants. Yet, the theme of the evening captured by Lulete Mola, co-founder of the Minnesota Black

Collective Foundation, situated Black women's leadership and autonomy appropriately when she stated

“Black women are not defined by our roles. We define our roles.”

Mola co-founded the Minnesota Black Collective Foundation along with Repa



Mekha (Nexus Community Partners) and Chanda Smith Baker (Minneapolis Foundation). Created in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, the collective was launched to combat anti-Blackness and center racial justice, engaging a “collective of philanthropic and community partners to effect long-term systems and community change.” Mola explained why this initiative was so important to her stating that “our proximity

to issues of racial justice show up continually and consistently.”

The same holds true for other Black women philanthropic leaders gathered that evening. Raichel Brown, who works for a corporate foundation, stated that in her work she felt as if she was at the forefront of advancing racial equity efforts, “doing it in ways that bring our lived experiences to bear.” This posture toward philanthropy is important because it means that the lives and experiences of Black women are crafted in the solutions that are proposed.

The work that Black women in philanthropy do to advance racial justice also reflects a commitment to elevating the voice of other Black women who are not at decision-making tables. Cassie Bean,



of the GHR Foundation, stated that while funding is important, not everything is about a grant:

“Sometimes you need to see someone like yourself reflected in a leadership role.”

Ubuntu: I Am Because We Are

As a collective, many Black people are prone to give credit to the people that have enabled them to become who they are today. Ubuntu, a South African phrase that recognizes the interconnectedness of people, I am because you are, is a cultural value that shapes the way Black and African descended people acknowledge the leaders and

mentors who have been a part of their lives. The group of Black women gathered embodied this spirit of Ubuntu in many ways, (re)membering the people who have sacrificially poured into their lives.

For some, one’s own parents and family played a prominent role in nurturing them to success. Acooa Ellis former Senior Vice President of Community Impact with Greater Twin Cities United Way reflected on the value of her family and even her neighborhood in cultivating the person that she is today: “I grew up in a space where I could have gotten into a lot of trouble. I was set aside and protected.” Michelle Benson, Vice President of Marketing and Communications at the Minneapolis Foundation, recounted the influence of her mother, stating that

“I am my mother’s child.” Susan Bass Roberts of the Pohlad Foundation indicated how her mother instilled in her a sense of independence and pride. “She taught me to believe in myself and not depend on others,” stated Roberts.

Similarly Milpha Blamo, Vice President of Talent and Culture at the Minneapolis Foundation recalled the impact of both her mother and father, and the sacrifices that both made to ensure her success and well-being.

Others acknowledged the value of the oft quoted African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child,” citing the montage of Black women and men who had been influential in their journey. Cassie Bean, Program Manager of the Racial Equity Initiative at the GHR

Foundation, affirmed this and said that it is “Impossible to pick one single woman. There is a tapestry of women and some men, embodying these characteristics.” Tonya Allen also affirmed this, naming one woman in particular who she stated “set me up as a leader. Carol Goss gave me permission to lead in a strategic way.”

Counting the number of Black women who were inspiration in her own life, Lulete Mola stated,

“where there is a Black woman, there is love.”

Olivia Jefferson reflected on the importance of Black women as mentors as well, recognizing the privilege she has had of so many Black women pouring into her: “My

sister in love came into my life when I was 13 years old. I lost my mom in undergrad and she stood in the gap as a mentor and coach.” She also identified the Black woman who gave her her first job after college as well as the Black women who brought her into public health.

When it came to Black women in philanthropy, Mya Beecham said that her mentors encouraged her not to get stressed out about dominant culture: “Don’t let it get to your head.” Raichel reflected on the words that she was given to deepen her leadership, “Realize your power, don’t give it away.” Similarly, Chanda Smith Baker shared that she was encouraged to “Be Bold and know that you alone may be the only one in the room...so be bold.”



Inspiring Others, Giving Back

Inspired by the ways that Black women have impacted their own lives, those gathered in the room also reflected on the advice that they would give to their younger selves as well as the next generation of Black women philanthropic leaders. Chanda spoke to

the importance of telling her younger self to hang in there in spite of the obstacles that would be encountered along the way.

*“Keep the light
burning, no
matter what”*

she said. Michelle illustrated the importance of slowing

down instead of rushing to keep up with others or feel a sense of false accomplishment. “My first job was so fast paced. I needed to slow down and take it all in,” she stated.

“I would also tell my younger self to know my value and worth. To speak up when I am at the table.”

There is enough room for everyone.” Similarly, Stephannie Lewis, Associate Vice President of Community Impact at Greater Twin Cities United stated the value of slowing down: “Relax, it will happen. In rushing, you make temporary decisions that have long term consequences.”



LaToya Burrell of the Anderson Foundation stated how she would encourage her younger self to understand the power and value of community, and to acknowledge the importance of networking and community resources.

Maya shared that she would tell her younger self to focus. “Focus on the right things,” she said. “Be responsible for your own education. Get rid of foolishness. If I knew back then what I know right now, I would be more laser focused.” Susan stated that she would encourage her younger self to tap into the things that she was most passionate about: “Figure out what moves you and what your purpose is. Move toward that and don’t let fear be a motivator.”

Offering words of encouragement to the next generation of Black women in philanthropy, Tonya Allen, President of the McKnight Foundation, offered poignant advice for Black women aspiring to be in philanthropy sharing that they can leverage to rewrite the rules.

“We have the power and the ability to rewrite the rules... We reshape institutions by rewriting the rules,”

she said. To this, Stephannie emphasized the importance of staying curious in one’s work: “Ask questions, don’t make assumptions. Curiosity will lead you to the solutions.” LaToya cautioned that it can sometimes take a while for the work that we do to pay off. She said,

“You plant the seed and may not be able to enjoy the shade.”

At the same time, she acknowledged the importance of building on the work that has already been done to improve the future. Cassie similarly advised that we cannot “measure success based on snapshots. Things rarely happen from A-Z. Like our ancestors before us, plant the seeds.”

Acooa, speaking from her own professional and lived experience, articulated the value of Black women in

philanthropy first having experiences in direct service. For her, the experience would give people a better understanding of the ways that philanthropy shows up in the lives of people and places.

Why the Sisterhood Matters in Philanthropy

The sisterhood, or network of Black women in philanthropy



is not just for aesthetics. Going back to the principles of Ubuntu, the sisterhood is important because it will take a village to move Black communities forward.

Tonya stated that the reason why the sisterhood is important is because of the way that Black women lead. “The most significant movements in racial equity have Black women associated with them,” she said.

“Black women are leading in innovative ways, diversifying and increasing investments for organizations of color.”

Similarly, Lulete shared that community building is critical for Black women in philanthropy because it is a strategy that leads to greater impact in the field: “We are more impactful in moving resources when we have each other, it is harder when we don’t have community.”

Susan felt that Black women in philanthropy as a collective represent people that she can turn to for help. “It is different than other Black women friends who are not in philanthropy,” she said. “We are talking about race at work daily, we need to have a squad who can lift us up when doing the heavy work. After George Floyd was murdered in the middle of COVID and we couldn’t gather. It was a time that was so heavy for all of us. For us to come together was medicine for the soul.”

For Olivia, the sisterhood is important because of the ways that Black women are marginalized in other spaces. “Our perspectives are often tokenized,” she said.

“The sisterhood understands and affirms us which is why there is a need to create safe spaces to talk about our own. And when we don’t have each other’s interest at heart, we can harm each other.”

Acoa also stated that “working in spaces that don’t center Blackness can be

exhausting. We need people around us who understand what it means to navigate white spaces in a Black female body.” But Acoa also offered words of caution in creating these spaces for Black women: “We need to support and affirm each other quietly because folks get nervous. So much of what we are doing involves moving resources. People get suspicious when moving the status quo.”

Closing Thoughts

In spite of the barriers that these Black women have encountered as leaders in philanthropy, it is clear that their commitment to each other and to advancing equity in Black communities is a motivating factor in their work. Still, it is imperative that the philanthropic sector



not only support Black women’s leadership with lip service but place resources on the table to grow their leadership, strengthen their networks, and sustain their emotional and physical well-being. Black women, though immensely powerful, cannot do the work to right the wrongs of white supremacy in isolation and need accomplices in the field, as well as outside the field,

to ensure that their visions are not only accomplished but sustained over the generations.