

Our Quality of Life
by K. Anoa Monsho

You can't solve a problem until you admit that you have one. And then we need to act as a community to fix the leak in our soul...a leak in the soul of Austin. And the stakes are too high to not get it straight.

Toby Futrell

A few weeks ago, Harold McMillan – creator and producer of the Clarksville (now Austin) Jazz Festival and director of the arts umbrella organization DiverseArts – was working on pre-production at Kenny Dorham’s Backyard. The small outdoor venue is home to his newest venture, the East End Summer Music Series. He ran into another artist/producer who knew he was serving on the Arts, Culture and Entertainment sub-committee of the African American Quality of Life implementation team.

“Say man, how much money are you getting out that pot of money the City’s throwing at us and how can I get some,” he asked McMillan, who patiently explained that– if all goes well and the process isn’t derailed by the crabs-in-a-barrel mentality that sometimes surfaces when we put our individual interests before the community’s –most, if not all, African Americans in Austin stand to benefit.

“I don’t think people know just how much of a labor of faith this is for those of us who are volunteering on these teams,” McMillan said. “In my case, I have to maintain a regular job, produce my shows, play my gigs, hang with my son and try to have a life *in addition* to spending somewhere between six and ten hours a week working on this effort...and I’m not even a team leader!”

If you don’t know what the African American Quality of Life initiative is, here’s a short synopsis: Last spring, City Manager Toby Futrell, disturbed by several reports she’d read indicating that the quality of life for black folks in Austin was not as good as it is for others, commissioned her own report. It confirmed earlier findings; in several key areas, African Americans were not experiencing the good that Austin has to offer other groups. In fact, instead of flocking to Austin as they do other Southern cities, African Americans are *leaving* Austin.

“We need to resolve the contradictions between what we say we believe and what we actually do. To get at the heart of the race issue that confronts us in Austin today, we... need to act as a community to fix the leak in our soul. Because we have got a leak in the soul of Austin,” Futrell said.

When fire ravaged the popular nightclub Midtown Live, police actions brought the issues into sharp focus. People around the country were shocked as they read the racist text messages exchanged by some of the officers. Blacks in Austin mourned the loss of an important social resource and were angered at police comments.

Although the City Manager had been considering solutions to the issue, the Midtown fire made action–sooner, rather than later–imperative. Futrell hired Robena Jackson of Group Solutions RJW to conduct a series of forums in the community to determine what the City could do to create a more welcoming atmosphere for African Americans.

“The Midtown Live fire – both losing the only black-owned club of its size and the police remarks– made it especially important that the community have a productive

way to discuss Midtown within the wider context of being black and living in Austin. Out of that loss came some very creative and positive recommendations,” Jackson said.

Group Solutions held the series of forums in East Austin, using a format that required people to write their recommendations in response to comments made by panelists selected for their knowledge, expertise and experience in given areas of concern. She presented that report to the City Council in May. At the same time, in an unprecedented show of organizational unity, the NAACP, the Austin Area Urban League and the Capital City Chamber of Commerce requested that— rather than simply handing over the recommendations to City staff to implement— the community be allowed to prioritize and further shape those recommendations and further, be included on the implementation phase.

Council approved the request and the organizations— joined by the Austin Revitalization Authority, Pro Arts Collective and the Alliance for African American Health in Central Texas— held a forum at Huston-Tillotson, where members of the community spoke to the issues at hand. That meeting resulted in the Community Position Paper, which outlined short term, intermediate and long term solutions/action items for the City.

That document is the basis for the work being done now by more than one hundred people divided into six teams. Each team is co-chaired by a senior level (assistant director or above) City staff person, selected by Acting Assistant City Manager Michael McDonald, paired with a highly involved community member (Jeffrey Richard, Austin Area Urban League; Nelson Linder, NAACP; Greg Marshall, Capital City Chamber of Commerce; Byron Marshall, Austin Revitalization Authority; Lisa Byrd, Pro-Arts Collective and Joe Barnes, Alliance for African American Health in Central Texas.) Team members were asked to volunteer based on knowledge, experience, reputation for working effectively and successfully on community projects and prior involvement in the QOL process during the Group Solutions forums.

“Just as it took the will of the larger society to overcome the injustices of the past,” said McDonald. “It will take the will of this entire community to correct the many negative trends revealed in the score card and emphasized by the African American community in the forums that took place.”

To help support the Quality of Life initiative, Futrell proposed a first year investment of \$729,000 in the City’s upcoming budget, which is currently before Council. This proposed investment may change based on the implementation strategies that surface from the committees and other budgetary variables that will have to be balanced by Council.

The teams have been meeting and working several hours each week since early July on complex issues they hope will result in long term policy changes in the way the City does business.

“Ultimately, if we succeed – and we can only do that with the support of the community – this initiative will benefit all of Austin, not just African Americans,” said Greg Marshall. “This process is only one step toward making Austin as wonderful for us as it is for everyone else. Everyone has a part to play; each of us can improve the quality of life for the community by mentoring, volunteering in our own organizations, serving on boards and commissions, participating in community church activities and supporting our artists. The key is to be a part of the solution.”

***Our Quality of Life** will appear here weekly for the next several weeks. To stay informed on Quality of Life issues, tune in to KAZI 88.7 on Thursday mornings from 8 to 9 am. Information updates and timelines, as well as position papers and reports can be found at www.aaul.org/qualityoflife Hard copies of the reports and updates are available at the NAACP, Urban League, ARA and Capital City Chamber of Commerce offices. Community Co-chairs are planning a community meeting before the final presentation to the City Council. Writer K. Anoa Monsho serves on the Arts, Culture and Entertainment committee.*