Airick Leonard West  
community first  

By Bradley Osborn  July 2008

A Kansas City area native, but raised primarily in foster care in southern Missouri, Airick Leonard West experienced racism from an early age. While living in a small town near the Arkansas border, he was the only African American in his entire school district. At 16, West returned to the Kansas City area, finished high school on his own and attended Kansas University briefly before joining a soon-to-fail dot-com firm. He then became an IT entrepreneur, later selling his firm to Computer Sciences Corporation. West bought a house in the Ivanhoe neighborhood of Kansas City, Mo., and later led the drafting of the Ivanhoe Neighborhood Plan.

West often takes meetings at the Lucile H. Bluford Branch of the Kansas City Public Library. Named for the publisher and editor of the _Kansas City Call_, Bluford is just blocks from West’s home that he shares with Dr. Robyne Turner, professor of Urban Affairs and director of the Cookingham Institute of Urban Affairs. West and Turner live a Spartan existence, cooperating on several civic projects. West also has legal guardianship of his cousin Damon, and he makes time for his ‘gentlemen’ – neighborhood youth for whom he serves as mentor, role model and friend.

West has sat on more boards and task forces before age 30 than most people do in a lifetime. He is faithful to the betterment of his neighborhood, serving as board treasurer of the Ivanhoe Neighborhood Council. He chairs both the University of Missouri Extension - Jackson County and the Blue Hills/Ivanhoe TIF Advisory Commission. He advocates for the practice of initiating community development through land use planning, and he has pushed for the installation of light rail on Prospect Avenue.

West is vice-chair of both the Black Archives of Mid-America and Simply Equine Assisted Therapy. He is conscientious about dining, shopping and using services in the Third Kansas City, Mo., Council District (see _viabilethird.com_), keeping his dollars near home to help support his community. And he is camp co-director for Harmony's Youth Leadership Institute (YLI).

“Several years ago friend of mine said, ‘Hey, I need you for a week this summer,’” said West. This was his introduction into YLI.

Harmony’s Youth Leadership Institute deals with –isms: classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. As co-director, West works with existing curricula to teach youth about diversity and getting along with others. He also augments the curricula when necessary. With a goal of campers gaining a more nuanced sense of awareness and a clear experience of the world, West deals mostly with the YLI staff as the staff deals with the youth delegates.

YLI exposes the different experiences of those who are targeted for oppression versus those who are not. Do non-targeted people know about the oppression of others? If they don’t, when they see it played out before them, will they gain empathy? It is this sort of experiential revelation that builds allies. Allies are those in the non-targeted group who have looked inward, seen the societal stereotypes that they have internalized and then choose to facilitate change by acting in the external world.

In 2008, West ran for, and won the at-large seat on the Kansas City, Mo., School Board. He says he is getting along with his fellow board members well, and he plans to set foot in every school in the district during his tenure.

One of the first things Kansas City, Mo., School Board Member Airick Leonard West wanted to discuss was his idea for adding transgender-inclusive language to the school district’s nondiscrimination policy. West wants to follow K.C. Councilwoman Beth Gottstein’s lead, and make discrimination based on gender identity/gender expression within the Kansas City, Mo., School District a thing of the past. The issue of broaching the gender identity/gender expression oversight was brought to West by one of his YLI delegates, Timothy Sallee. Another salient topic for West and his constituents is the return to community schools.
West would prefer his career as a politician be a short one. He’d like nothing better than to see the KC District return to full accreditation during his term on the board so that he could focus on building up his community. One project that he has spearheaded brings his concern for education and his desire for a healthy neighborhood together. West smiles more than slightly when he speaks of Ivanhoe house. He knows his “slightly larger soapbox” that he now stands atop will allow this project to grow.

Ivanhoe House puts college students into the Ivanhoe neighborhood in a residential situation. They live among the people of that community, and serve as subtle examples for them – nothing bombastic, just some folks studying and living nearby. West explains that seventy-five percent of the Ivanhoe neighborhood doesn’t have college degrees, and young people growing up with that reality have their future aspirations molded by it. The college students in residence do tutor school-aged children and youth, but West says that is just icing on the cake. The true purpose of Ivanhoe House is to set students’ aspirations higher while simultaneously showing them that they don’t have to escape the neighborhood to better themselves.

West’s roommate Robyne Turner used her expertise to acquire and present data that showed the income per acre ratio for the Third District, which sits east of downtown, is second in the city only to the Fourth District’s income per acre ratio, which is inclusive of the Country Club Plaza. She demonstrated the surprising buying power of the area. West hopes to use a similar approach to lift up the Kansas City School District, by telling an asset story rather than a woeful tale of deficits and disadvantages.

“Don’t just Focus on what’s not working,” he says. “Also focus on what is working.”

To learn more about Airick Leonard West, visit his Web site, _Airick.com_.

© Bradley Osborn 2008