



# Actualizing Equity 2019 : From Principles to Practice

## Leading with Equity: Electeds of Color

People of color, indigenous, immigrant, and low-income communities have always been at the forefront of social change. But systems and institutions intentionally built on a foundation of racism, bias and injustice — designed to benefit white people at the expense of people of color — have excluded our voices and leadership at all levels of government. In recent election cycles in the Twin Cities, we've seen local organizing efforts and groundbreaking campaigns that have elevated leaders of color to local, county and regional policy making positions. **At our March 2019 Actualizing Equity event, newly elected Hennepin County Commissioner Angela Conley, Richfield Mayor Maria Regan Gonzalez, and Brooklyn Park City Councilmember Wynfred Russell joined us to discuss their impetus for running and approaches to policymaking.**

### The Role of Organizing

**CONLEY:** Organizing is really where the power is. If we really want to advance an issue, we have the power to do that; we have the power in numbers. Knowing that, making the decision to run for this seat, I knew we weren't not going to have as much money. We weren't going to have as many connections and resources. But I know I have roots in community. My opponent raised \$200,000 while I raised \$30,000 and I won 55% [of the vote] because I organized more people and people stayed with us to carry this message out. This seat came out of what we grew and planted in community.

**REGAN GONZALEZ:** Organizing informs everything I do. Many people told me not the run. They said that nobody's going to vote for a young Latina who knows nothing about politics. But because I came from organizing I knew that's absolutely not true. I knew who the community is and I had connected with them. [Organizing] also taught me that I didn't need to run as white-passing Maria Regan, but I could run as myself and be authentic and speak to my values and enact that in my campaign. But if I didn't have that organizing background maybe I would have said, "You know what? You're right. I don't know what I'm doing. I'm not going to run."

**RUSSELL:** We ave all these structures and spaces [in electoral politics] that you're not used to, that were not built for you, that you have to navigate and negotiate. It came down to hardcore organizing from [campaign manager] Denise [Butler], who had experience building multi-lateral, multi-ethnic, multi-generational coalitions. Because of her experience, we were able to attract voters from across the spectrum. The last time I lost to the same candidate by six votes; this time we won by more than 55% of the vote because we brought a lot of people in.

### Decision to Run

**CONLEY:** I come from working for Hennepin County and the state of Minnesota for 20 years but no one was asking me for my opinions or my peers' opinions, and our disparities were creeping up to worst in the nation. That's unacceptable to me. I faced a 28-year incumbent and we'd never had a Black person or person of color on the board. Ever. But it wasn't just a historic win for us; it was also a historic win for people who have experienced housing insecurity like me, people who have experienced food insecurity like me.

**REGAN GONZALEZ:** We are an extremely diverse city but that diversity was not seen as an asset; it was seen as a deficit and detriment. And there's an absolute direct connection between leadership who had this deficit-based model around communities of color and low-wealth communities and the displacement of more than 2,000 low-income community members [from the Crossroads apartment complex]. It's not just that someone up there looks like me but is actually bringing new voices to the table that result in real tangible change.

**RUSSELL:** I've been very engaged and active with organizations like ACER (African Career, Resources and Education). But the issues around affordable housing, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, educational equity — those issues were not being addressed in full equitable way. That motivated me to run for office.



From left: Richfield Mayor Maria Regan Gonzalez, and Brooklyn Park City Councilmember Wynfred Russell, Hennepin County Commissioner Angela Conley

## Successes in Campaigning

**CONLEY:** In my campaign, I was very clear that we start by asking people what issues matter to them. Nobody ever, really, in spaces of government let my voice be heard so I wanted to be intentional about listening to the stories of the people behind those doors. For instance, I'm a strong proponent of reforming the cash bail system so when I was talking to people at the doors, there was always someone with a story like "My cousin is in jail right now because she can't afford to get out."

I found myself becoming really impatient with umbrella terminology and the misuse of the word equity. I started thinking about and speaking to a lens of liberation: what does it mean to be liberated from systems that oppress you? I surprised myself how my language started to change, how I was being unapologetic at those doors. I was showing up with a big Afro — my logo was a big Afro, too — and not biting my tongue. People appreciate that. But it challenges these narrative about running for office. Because people running for office usually stay safe. The fact that we refused to stay safe and we won anyway by large margins is really telling of where we're headed.

**REGAN GONZALEZ:** Our strategy was building a coalition of folks from all different walks of life. On my campaign team, we had a lady who was a leader in her union and her church; a group of leaders in the Tibetan community; Latino youth working in their church groups and friend circles; and a lot of people who were leads in their own apartment buildings.

We had multi-generational, multi-lingual outreach and we used the language of inclusion and equity. I was always thinking about how to flip the dominant narrative in everything we say and do. Our campaign leadership would emphasize that we are mini reflection of the entire world that we have in our own backyards — and this is an asset. We are positioned well to attract businesses and people from all over. I moved to Richfield because I want to raise children in a community that's extremely diverse and connected.

But while one of the things I care about most is equity, I'm not going to use lingo that nobody understands and misuses all the time. I'm also not going to use words that I believe in but I know are exclusive for other people. So instead of saying *affordable housing*, I'd say housing that's accessible to all our residents, from new immigrant families to low-income seniors who want to age in place. We always talked about a vision that includes many different groups.

**RUSSELL:** Brooklyn Park has an over representation of apartment complexes relative to other cities of that size but people who said they were supportive and giving me campaign strategy were telling me "Forget about those apartments. Don't campaign in those apartments. Don't talk to those renters." But if you know Brooklyn Park, a high percentage of those residents are people of color. That's where we went. We knocked all those apartment doors and that's where the majority of our votes came from. That's how we won. We flipped that strategy.

### Angela Conley

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## Equity in Policymaking

**CONLEY:** I swore in on *The New Jim Crow* and that was intentional. When you become part of an institution that has historically oppressed your people and people who look like you, you have an obligation to chip away at that system and bring people's voices in. So when I'm saying, "Show me line by line the Health and Human Services budget to understand what we're spending to address homelessness," and people are sweating and adjusting in their seats, it shows that these questions haven't been asked. You can visibly see that things are different. The conversations are different. The requests of staff are different. My staff now are department heads and I'm saying "60% of people living outside right now are Black people, and, of that, about 59% are people 25 to 40 years old. So young Black men and women are outside living on the street, and that's not a priority discussion for you?"

**REGAN GONZALEZ:** A lot of it is getting that data and stories and translating it into policies and budgets. A lot of people didn't know that we have the worst racial inequity in homeownership in our own backyards. Over 70% of white residents in Richfield own their homes and 70% of people of color households are renters. When you're looking at housing stability and opportunities to build wealth, lifting up that data and telling a story with it leads to initiatives like the down payment assistance program we have now, where we'll give Richfield renters \$10,000 if they want to buy a home in Richfield — and they don't have to pay it back.

But we are leaders within systems that have been created to kill our people. We're part of that system and we also experience it in many different ways on a daily basis. Part of us being strong and authentic is continuing to network and build relationships [with other elected leaders of color]. How do we all move together? We have critical mass but unless we leverage and use that critical mass to work together we're islands in our areas.

**RUSSELL:** A number of [electeds of color] are around now but this is new to us. What does policy formulation look like? How do we push policies

through that advance our interests and our people? This [increase in electeds of color] is huge but we need to support these folks. The last thing we need is to have them fail. Just electing one Black dude on the city council, that's not all there is to it. We still have a lot of work to do to destroy and demolish the historic inequalities that exist.

