

On Allyship ... In Their Own Words

INTERVIEWS BY
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In 2020, in response to the civil unrest occurring in Louisville and around the country, *Today's Woman* publisher Tawana Bain, and her associate Phoebe Wood founded WOC & WWAR (Women of Color & White Women Against Racism) to encourage women of different backgrounds and experiences to build authentic relationships with one another. We sat down with five of the organization's members to chat about allyship, the role it has played in their lives, and the importance of allyship in bridging the racial divide in Louisville. Here's what they had to say.



Cynthia Knapek
PRESIDENT, LEADERSHIP LOUISVILLE CENTER

On becoming an ally:

My journey into allyship is aligned with my own journey to find my voice. Like a lot of women, I was raised in a way that is like, put your head down and get your work done. And that's what's expected of you. My journey to allyship was about me figuring out that that's not enough. By putting your head down and getting your own work done, you become complicit in the status quo. My journey has a lot to do with figuring out how do I use this voice ... to help other people have an aha moment?

On the importance of diversity, equity and inclusion:

There's volumes of data about what makes a high-performance team and almost all of it is centered around the idea of embracing innovation and diverse voices to drive innovation. If you would like to grow the pie, have a path forward where things are going to be bigger and better for all of us, then we as an organization must be good at belonging and trust. We must be good at harnessing all the diverse voices.

On Louisville's struggles and the future:

A lot of the people who live in this community have lived here for a long time and have roots here. Roots are great but they also make it harder to change. We [Louisville] have struggled with that. Because of the kind of a racial reckoning we have been through for the last couple of years, I think that this community could actually emerge on the other side as one of the most forward-thinking communities in the country. I'm hopeful that it will pay off enormously for this community and that we will be on our way to becoming known for our inclusive behavior and our ability to make some changes.



Marita Willis
NONPROFIT EXECUTIVE

On what allyship means:

I think it's extending your arm as far as you can reach it to another. Even if it hurts.

On Louisville's racial divide:

The large portion of white folk don't come beyond 9th Street. And what's beyond 9th Street is where the majority of Black people live. I think it is time, extensively in the Louisville community, for us to come together, to share oneness. It goes beyond the phone calls and the task meetings. We have to come together around a common vision of making the change and being the change that we want to see. And that's for real.

On building relationships:

We're still not having real lunch. Like, don't come with your agenda. Don't try to ask me the questions indirectly just come and learn. Let's really learn and build trust so that we can be real allies.



Kathy Knotts
GRANTS OFFICER, THE GHEENS FOUNDATION

On defining allyship:

I think of it as someone who is right there next to you. Someone who thinks the way you do and believes the things you do and who has your back.

On becoming an ally:

I had seen our country and our city go through some very emotional hard times over the last several years. And I wanted to do something. I didn't want to sit on the sidelines. You know I didn't know what I was going to do but I was frustrated by doing nothing.

On joining WOC & WWAR:

I love the idea of Black women and white women getting closer to each other through discussion and shared experiences. It's getting proximate with each other and working together. It's a whole different thing than just meeting for lunch occasionally. I wanted to become more intentional about who my friends are and not just go home at 5 o'clock to the same neighborhood. I wanted to expand my group of friends.



Carmen Moreno-Rivera
PRESIDENT, FACILITIES MANAGEMENT SERVICES

On what allyship means:

There are some foundational principles around being an ally. [It's] growing and learning through listening and believing the experiences of people of color or those who are disabled, etc. It's building that trust and consistency and accountability. But the biggest thing is that it's a lifelong journey, like it's a continuous learning experience. This is not something that you can take a training on and then be done with. There's a commitment there. Like a real long-term commitment.

On allyship done right:

Early in my career as an engineer, I was the only woman. I was the only Black woman and I was the only Latina. It was important that I had several senior leaders be an ally in the form of a sponsor. When I wasn't at those tables, when my name wasn't offered up for promotions, or special projects, they were the ones putting my name in the hat and actually being kind of forceful, and using their platform, to get me those opportunities.

On allies calling out bias, racism and microaggressions in the workplace:

At the base of all of this is courage — to even want to push back on folks. The second piece of it, is having the language to say "Hey... that wasn't the right thing to say and this is why." I think not having the why behind it makes people a little skittish. There also [needs to be] an understanding that you don't have to confront the situation yourself. That's what your HR department is for. That's what other senior leaders with open door policies are for. I think just having the courage to want to do something first, and then figuring out what that means.

On challenging allies to delve deeper:

If you're still managing through old behaviors and old lenses...if you're not going to take a hard look at your organizational culture, or deep inside yourself to understand why you're so adamant about some policy that has exclusionary outcomes, then what's the point?



Johnetta Roberts
ENTREPRENEUR,
THE 40 & 1 COMPANY

On allies using their voices:

Education around strategies is very helpful. Do you even recognize when it's time for you to speak up? And then what do you say, in order to navigate that room? There are books about ways that you can be more vocal and be more visible. Advocate, not just quietly with donations, but the voice is important. But often people say, I don't know what to say, that will make it worse. I think right behind education is starting small. Practice with your close circle of friends. I tell some of my white women friends, if you've been a part of a committee for 20 years, you should have some level of comfort. These are not strangers. Where are you comfortable? You can start there and practice using your voice.