

New Urban League leader brings wealth of experience to multifaceted agency

By: Velvet Spicer | October 11, 2019

Seanelle Hawkins might well be described as a dynamo. Equal parts gutsy and tenacious, Hawkins grew up being reminded that she had something that others did not.

"My father told me that I had a fire that lived inside of me, that I could use this fire only one time, but it would keep me out of danger. He told me that when I was about 5," says the new president and CEO of the Urban League of Rochester, N.Y. Inc. He said "don't tell your mom; she doesn't have it. Only you have it."



Seanelle Hawkins (Photo by Kate Melton)

Hawkins took it to heart, and it gave her a sense of security she otherwise might not have had growing up in the projects in Brooklyn.

"My father would tell me not to cut through the park, but it was the shortest way to get to my school. So I cut through the park knowing that I had this fire and if anyone messed with me, I'd just use the fire," Hawkins recalls with a laugh. "If someone was being bullied I'd tell them to leave them alone."

It wasn't until about seven years ago that Hawkins finally asked her father why he would tell her something like that, something that could potentially be dangerous.

"He said, 'You really don't understand why I told you that? Because you did anything you wanted to do and it made you feel like you are unstoppable,'" she says.

So unstoppable, in fact, that Hawkins would move beyond a life of poverty and teen motherhood to achieve a master's degree and doctorate, as well as to lead not one, but three nonprofit organizations in the last decade.

"I always wanted to work for a mission-driven organization helping women and children, or anyone that's been impacted by poverty," she says. "So all of the work that I've done has led to this. I feel like this is the culmination of my work."

Hawkins serves as the first female leader of the 54-year-old Urban League of Rochester. The nonprofit has some 90 employees and a budget of more than \$4 million. The organization annually serves thousands of individuals in the Rochester area through dozens of human services programs.

"We are a rich trove of resources for the Rochester community," Hawkins says. "We need to remind the community that we're here and we have so much to offer."

50 years of programming

The Urban League of Rochester was founded in 1965 in response to racial unrest and riots that had paralyzed the community. The organization's first set of programs focused on giving minorities equal access to jobs, education and housing.

Within years, the Urban League had grown exponentially in terms of staff and services. In 1973, William Johnson Jr. left the Urban League of Flint, Mich., to become the Rochester organization's president and CEO. In 1980, the Salute to Black Scholars Program was formed, and in 1984 the Urban League of Rochester launched its first developmental disabilities program.

In 1988, the Minority and Women Business Center was founded and the Family Consultant Program served 111 families.

In 1994, Johnson became Rochester's first black mayor, paving the way for William Clark's promotion from the Urban League's chief financial officer to president and CEO, a role he maintained until his retirement this year.

In 1995, the Urban League Economic Development Corp. opened its first large-scale construction project, Blossom Village. In 2000, the Urban League raised \$720,000 to renovate its main office and current home on North Clinton Avenue.

Today, the agency serves the community in a multitude of ways. Its Youth Education & Development Division is comprised of several academic achievement and enrichment programs that prepare students in grades six to 12 for college, work and life. The Urban League's Afterschool Academy boasts a 90 percent success rate of middle school students maintaining or increasing their math skills over the summer.

Workforce development is a big part of the nonprofit's work. Programs include YouthBuild, Face Forward 3, Project B.E.A.M., Navigator and AmeriCorps. Programs help young adults achieve their TASC, or general equivalency diploma, as well as industry-recognized credentials and certifications.

The Pathways to Justice Careers for Youth Program provides in-school youth with the academic and career services they need to enter into the emergency services and justice career fields.

The Urban League's Business Development Center helps minorities and women launch and grow their businesses. The Home Store promotes homeownership and provides financial literacy education for first-time homebuyers. Thirty-eight people who took the Homebuyer Education Class in the 2017-18 program year closed on a home during that time, and 16 business development clients increased their business sales by \$7.17 million collectively in the same time period.

The nonprofit's Business Development Center also expanded its capacity to serve more entrepreneurs by starting the KeyBank Build & Boost Program, a collaboration between the Urban League and the Ibero-American Action League. The goal of the program is to expand Urban League's business development services to individuals in the neighborhoods that Ibero serves, which primarily is a Latino population.

Under the umbrella of the organization's economic development, a number of projects have been completed through the years. ULREDC owns and manages 250 or more apartments in a dozen developments. ULREDC is one of the area's largest developers of affordable, single-family housing in the Rochester area.

For individuals with developmental disabilities, the Urban League provides day habilitation programs, community habilitation, family care, individual support services to help adults establish or maintain their own homes, parenting support and training, respite care and a family reimbursement program which offers reimbursement for goods and services that enhance the quality of life for individuals in a family.

Urban League's Family and Children Services programs help seniors remain in their homes through the agency's expanded In-home Services for the Elderly Program; the Family Consultant Program, which helps children avoid foster care placement; and parenting education classes, where participants learn positive parenting practices and age-appropriate expectations for their children.

"We also have the Home Store. We help individuals with foreclosure prevention, so we're actually a housing council," Hawkins notes. "And we help individuals with the purchase of their home. Most people don't know that."

Serving others

Hawkins is uniquely equipped to lead an organization with the size and influence of the Urban League.

"My first job was at a vacation camp for the blind in Spring Valley, N.Y.," she recalls. "And that taught me to do the very best at whatever you do because someone will always uncover the messiness."

One of her jobs at the camp was as a waitress for the visually impaired campers.

"You couldn't just wipe a table down and do that quickly because if you're blind you don't look at the table, you feel the table," she explains. "So you have to do your very best and think about who you're serving and are you meeting their needs."

The idea of "who is my population" has carried Hawkins from that first job to several others in the nonprofit human service sector. In 2004 she joined Wilson Commencement Park, where she served as director of its Early Learning Center. From there she joined Volunteers of America Western N.Y. as vice president of services for children and families, where she oversaw a staff of 60 and implemented a turnaround strategy for the ailing department.

Hawkins then worked as executive director for Quad A for Kids, and then as executive director of PathStone Corp.'s Sojourner House and Wilson Commencement Park for more than three years before arriving at Urban League in June of this year.

"Rochester has been good to me because I've had a lot of leadership opportunities that have prepared me for this," Hawkins says, adding that the dual role she had at PathStone benefitted both her and the community. "I think that it's a really smart way to show your funders that you're being a good steward of your dollars."

And that leads to collaboration that has not always been prevalent in the not-for-profit arena.

"You naturally find the synergies between the organizations," she says. "As you become a larger organization, it's easy to get siloed."

The Urban League is working to find more collaborations in the community, Hawkins said.

"We want folks to be at the table talking about what's happening in the community, where there are solutions and where there are opportunities for the Urban League to partner," she added.

To that end, on Nov. 12, the Urban League will host "Equity & U: Not Your Average Luncheon," a program that will bring together local business owners, nonprofit organizations and community change-makers to learn more about its programs, vision for community inclusivity and plans for creating a more equitable Rochester.

Sebrone Johnson, the Urban League's vice president of operations, says Rochester is a city of silos.

"And we're not resource poor but we don't partner very often," Johnson explains. "One of the things Urban League is committed to is really trying to break down the silos and partner with agencies and groups that we may not ever have partnered with before. But to say that together we're really stronger."

Hawkins' goals as the Urban League's new leader includes branding and working on getting the organization's story out, as well as a longer-term goal of growing youth development programs and disability services for adults.

"We'd love to create opportunities for the individuals that we serve and make sure that they can grow wealth themselves," Hawkins says.

Johnson calls the organization a social networking think tank.

"We look at the community, we see the problems and as an organization that's committed to empowering communities we try to see if the need matches up to what we can actually do," he says. "We try to scour the community and see if we have an inherent answer that's already here within our brain trust."

Hawkins describes herself a servant leader. She says she likes to be part of the work and enjoys having a team whose vision aligns with hers. Her assistant Patricia Butler says she already has seen a difference within the walls of the nonprofit in the few short months Hawkins has been with Urban League.

"She's met with so many of our partners. She has a drive for seeing the mission through and making sure that the staff is empowered," Butler explains.

Johnson says Hawkins is not as interested in protecting Urban League's "how-tos" as she is in ensuring the agency is part of an overall solution with other agencies.

Collaboration is the key to the Urban League's success, Butler adds.

"The willingness to want to learn more as far as other organizations (are concerned), what they do. We have our team in here, but creating a partnership with other organizations, that definitely helps," she says.

For her part, Hawkins says the staff's passion for what they do is what makes the organization stand out.

"Friday afternoon no one's running home. People are here at 6 o'clock working," Hawkins says with surprise. "I've never worked at an organization where at 6 o'clock people are still here doing work, just because they're passionate about it. They want to be successful."

Adds Johnson: "The Urban League has a number of committed individuals who sacrifice pay and accolades many times for the greater good of the community. That makes it very successful."

Hawkins says the support the local organization gets from the national Urban League, as well as the local board of directors lends to its success as well. Still, the Urban League of Rochester is not without its challenges. Funding tends to be a bump in the road for many nonprofits, she acknowledges.

"It plagues nonprofits because you want to just do the work and not have to worry about how are we going to do this and how are we going to pay these bills," Hawkins says.

While that can be frustrating, as well as "not knowing what I don't know," she says, she is comforted in the fact that every day is a good day for her.

"I can actually say there are no negatives to it," Hawkins says of her newest endeavor.

Work-life balance

Hawkins, a new mom with four children—three daughters, Dajanee Hoyos, Amiah Tracy and Zoe Hawkins; and son Darae Parrish—is married to husband John Hawkins and lives in Rochester.

In her spare time she enjoys travel, hoverboarding and participating in Tough Mudders, an endurance event series in which participants attempt 10- to 12-mile long obstacle courses. She also serves as secretary for the Child Care Council Inc., and she is a board member for Project Exile and Rochester Works!

Hawkins, who lost her father just days after beginning her new role at the Urban League, says her parents changed her life. Her mom was blind from the age of 13, while her father lost his sight later in life.

"She had a degree. She worked for the medical examiner. She took the train to work every day. Nothing stopped her," Hawkins says of her mother. "She was a minister. She preached on the streets. I think that's where the servant leadership comes from. Despite her circumstances, she wanted to care for others and make sure other folks were good and be an example."

Hawkins' 93-year-old aunt visited her recently and when asked for the secret to her longevity she answered cooking your own food, maintaining spirituality and treating others the way you want to be treated. It's good advice, Hawkins says.

"Treat others the way you want to be treated and you'll be successful," Hawkins says, adding one additional piece of advice. "I've learned that education is the pathway out of poverty. And it doesn't have to be degrees. But never feel like, 'oh, I have a doctorate, I know everything.' You're learning something from everyone every day. That's what I've learned."

vspicer@bridgetowermedia.com / 585-653-4021 / @Velvet_Spicer