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## CITIZENS OF COMPASSION

TULSA IS OFFICIAL  
"COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITY"

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HOW TO MINIMIZE  
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# CITIZENS OF COMPASSION

BY BRIA BOLTON MOORE

ANDREA WALKER (LEFT) AND REV. BOB LAWRENCE (RIGHT)  
STEERING WHEEL MEMBERS OF COMPASSIONATE TULSA

## TULSA BECAME OFFICIAL “COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITY” IN JUNE

**The Golden Rule:** *Treat others the way you would want to be treated. This message of compassion is preached from pulpits and plastered on preschool walls, but the leaders behind a new initiative called Compassionate Tulsa are committed to keeping it front of mind for all Tulsans.*

### How It Started

At a board of directors meeting about two-and-a-half years ago, a Tulsa Interfaith Alliance board member shared about author and religious scholar Karen Armstrong who won a TED Prize in 2008 and created a Charter for Compassion.

“She really studied the common denominators among all the major world religions, and she found that all that she studied had among their value systems

some sort of the Golden Rule,” said Andrea Walker, Ph.D., a member of Tulsa’s compassion committee, vice-chair of the Tulsa Human Rights Commission and a psychology professor at Oral Roberts University. “She said this is something we can all agree on, regardless of what our religions are and what our differences are in our specific belief systems. We all want to live in a safe and prosperous place.”

Armstrong wrote the Charter for Compassion with the help of thousands of contributors and started a movement where cities across the globe adopt the charter and create their own resolution or statement of adherence. Rev. Bob Lawrence, executive director of the Tulsa Interfaith Alliance, said the alliance was intrigued by the opportunity to become a compassionate community

but knew they didn’t have the manpower to make it a reality. Then, in the summer of 2014, Walker met with Lawrence, and the project was set in motion.

“We’re a great, loving, compassionate community as it is, but there’s always room for improvement,” Walker said. “We [a subcommittee of the Human Rights Commission looking at interfaith relations] were looking for something we could do to help contribute to making Tulsa a greater hub of diversity, more accepting of diversity, and improve our ability to work together as a community. So, the project fit our needs, and it was something the Tulsa Interfaith Alliance had in mind for a long time.”

The city’s Human Rights Commission spearheaded the effort, and a five-member committee, including Walker and Lawrence,



created a resolution specific to Tulsa. In June, the Tulsa City Council voted to approve the resolution, and Mayor Dewey Bartlett signed it. Tulsa became a “Compassionate Community.”

According to its mission statement, Compassionate Tulsa exists “to champion and nurture the growth of compassion in Tulsa and surrounding communities, to highlight the compassion of others, and to alleviate suffering and bring healing through the focus on compassion.”

### **Compassionate Tulsa Steering Wheel is a Rainbow**

Fifteen people make up the compassion committee, which Walker refers to as “the compassionate steering wheel for Tulsa.”

“We have different religious perspectives represented, different racial and ethnic backgrounds represented, Walker said, “sexual minorities are represented, and it’s a group of very passionate, concerned community members that are really focused on what we can do to continue to make Tulsa a fantastic place to be.”

Walker said objectives are still in the formative stages, but they are planning to coordinate compassionate work in nine sectors: arts; business; communities; education; environment; health care; peace and nonviolence; religion, spirituality, interfaith; and science and research.

“As large, broad-scale as it is, what we ultimately hope for is a growth in our culture of increased self-awareness and increased consideration of others,” Walker said.

Walker wishes for compassion to saturate Tulsa. “If it’s saturating the community, then we’re all hearing about it, and we’re all identifying it, and we’re starting to internalize it... and then it comes out in our behaviors and our actions.”

### **Self-Awareness and Sharing Compassion with Children**

Walker said that the first step to being compassionate is to have self-compassion.

“The research on this concept was conducted by Dr. Kristen Neff, and she found that caring for ourselves compassionately means that we ultimately have more to give others during their distress,” Walker explained. “So when we experience something difficult and trying, it’s important for us to recognize that our experience is part of the human struggle in which all others can relate and understand to some degree. “Recognizing how we are similar to

others then helps us to relate to others more and ultimately connect more with other parents. Dr. Neff uses the example of her son who was diagnosed with autism. When she learned of the diagnosis, she was devastated, but rather than feel sorry for herself and focus on how her experience was different from others, she began to identify with other parents. She saw that some parents actually had it much worse but recognized that parenting is difficult for everyone.”

Walker shared a few ways families can teach compassion to children and impact the community in a compassionate way:

- Think about and care for neighbors.
- Take your children with you when you volunteer.
- Teach your children to share and give.
- Examine how you, as a parent, view and treat others.

“I think it’s important for parents to be really self-aware about their own biases and prejudices as we tend to teach those to our children,” Walker said. “Sometimes we don’t even mean to; sometimes we just don’t even know we have them.”

- Talk about others’ perspectives with your children.

“As it becomes more and more appropriate, and as a child’s cognitive ability develops, discuss the implications of their experiences for others. I think it’s important for parents to discuss with them, ‘so what do you think that was like for so and so?’ and encourage an empathetic type of consciousness.”

Lawrence suggests that parents talk with children about people’s similarities instead of differences.

“What I would like to see families learn is that the person standing with a cardboard sign at the end of the freeway off-ramp also has a mother, also has a father, also possibly has children,” Lawrence said. “That person also has the exact same needs that I have. If I’m talking to one of my children, I’d say, ‘See that man over there? He has red hair; so do you’ and draw out ways in which those to whom we want to give compassion, highlight ways in which they are like us rather than the ways they are not like us. That has been a way into compassion for me—to understand the people that I want to think are so different than me are pretty much just like me.”

### **Find Your Own Expression and Share It**

Lawrence said his time spent working toward Tulsa being recognized as a compassionate community has altered his own

views about compassion.

“This work on the compassion project, I was coming at it as a systems analyst [his former career]—somebody who stands up and says, ‘Okay, this is where we are, this is where we want to be, and these are the steps that we need to follow to get there,’” Lawrence said. “So, using stereotypes, I was a typical middle-aged white male of privilege telling people what they were going to do with their lives. And that is so far from compassion. So, I backed off and realized the issue is not about what other people do—initially. I need to focus on what am I doing—how is compassion impacting my life, and how am I different as a result of compassion? And in the process of people seeing that, people knowing that, then they begin to see that compassion is possible as a way of life.”

Lawrence said the committee is determined to remember that everyone’s definition of compassion is different.

“This is not our project,” he said. “This is not about us. This is about compassion. So, we needed to make sure that there were ways for every definition of compassion to enter the equation—whether one viewed compassion as planting a bee-friendly flower garden to be compassionate to the earth or whether one thought compassion was volunteering to serve meals at Iron Gate or whether compassion was out of your wealth, just writing a check to an organization that can help.”

Mayor Dewey Bartlett said he has seen many Tulsans live compassionately. He said he’s seen a man donate more than 250 hours of his time and thousands of miles over the past two years driving low-income people to doctor appointments. He has watched fellow Tulsans provide meals for the homeless and care for the sick, but he also acknowledges that there’s still more to be done.

“Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow citizens and to honor the sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect,” Mayor Bartlett said. “I’d like to see us get to that place. This committee will give the effort true focus. As I’ve said, this is a journey of many miles; their job is to keep us going forward. The Roman philosopher Seneca said, ‘From a certain point onward there is no longer any turning back. That is the point that must be reached.’ I believe we are at that point, and there will be no turning back.”