

Rectifying disparities in our criminal justice system

The passion and excitement that pours from Rep. Shelia Stubbs, D-Madison, as she tells her story of activism and her pursuit of racial equity, is contagious. She makes you want to lean forward, to hear more, to join in her mission.

This has always been Stubbs' goal: to create pathways for more people to join her at the table and represent those who aren't always heard. As a pastor, community activist, 14 years as a Dane County Board District 23 Supervisor and in her newest role as the first African American state legislator representing Dane County ("breaking 170 years of history," she notes), she's established a reputation as a game changer.

"I've learned that I might be the only black person in the room, but that doesn't mean I'm the weakest person," Stubbs says. "The lack of representation of folks of color is a motivator to invest in our youth and create pathways for all people to hold leadership positions ... I just know I need to change the room."

As a Board District Supervisor, a role she still holds (and she's currently running for another term), her most meaningful impact came through her work to create the Dane County Community Restorative Courts, a program that works with low-level offenders to create an agreement to acknowledge the impact of their offenses, meet with victims and work through a process of restorative justice.

"Dane County has the highest rate of incarceration for people of color in the state," Stubbs says. "I wanted to find a way to meet people where they are, to address the root cause and ultimately keep them out of the criminal justice system."

Sharon Corrigan, Dane County Board Chair and Board District 26 Supervisor, worked with Stubbs on this project and says 90% of the individuals who go through the program have not re-offended. She attributes this success to Stubbs' leadership.

"Shelia is unique in her tenacity. She's smart about looking for opportunities to move an idea forward, figuring out how to get people on board, and how to draw people in. She has a magnetism about her," says Corrigan.

Stubbs is about one year into her role as a legislator and she is determined to push legislation in what she calls her "framework of equity." She speaks proudly of introducing her first bill last October with Lieutenant

A portrait of Shelia Stubbs, a Black woman with long, dark hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark, patterned top and a black beaded necklace. The background is blurred, showing an indoor setting with other people in the distance.

Shelia Stubbs

Governor Mandela Barnes to decriminalize marijuana. The bill decriminalizes small amounts of marijuana (less than 28 grams), prohibits law enforcement from establishing probable cause due to the odor of marijuana, and would facilitate expungement or dismissal of prior possession convictions.

"We need to evaluate what we define as punitive," Stubbs says. "The high rate of incarcerations of African Americans is tied to these minor offenses, and it creates racial disparities across so many levels of our society."

Her hope is this bill will address the "daunting" racial disparities that exist in Wisconsin, and help close the equality gap across Wisconsin.

In that vein, Stubbs also introduced an assembly bill that created the Governor's Advisory Council on Equity and Inclusion—which Governor Tony Evers signed as an executive order this past November. The council will advise the governor's staff on ways to improve equity and inclusion in all sectors across the state.

Stubbs is putting in the work for a busy 2020 by diving into issues like funding for education, pushing for sensible gun safety legislation and advocating for services for those who have been historically underrepresented or marginalized. She laughs with a wave of her hand and says, "I've been fighting all my life, so I'm not going to sit on the sideline now that I'm here. I'm going to get in the game." —Emily McCluhan

Changing company culture through linguistics

Communication is key to the workplace, and understanding language is key to communication.

That's the premise behind Samantha Beaver's linguistics start-up company, Memra Language Services.

Beaver analyzes companies' naturally occurring communication processes, which could include conversations, meetings, Slack feeds or survey responses, for employers to better understand how teams work together, hierarchy in the workplace and overall employee satisfaction with the company's culture.

"As we talk, we naturally bring all of ourselves with us—how you speak exposes who you are," Beaver says. "The idea is so compelling, and no one else is doing anything like this."

Beaver, who has a master's degree in linguistics, founded Memra Language Services about a year ago after realizing the work she was doing in school should be applied to workplaces.

Last year was a roller coaster for Beaver, but she's proud of how far she's come. Everyone she's worked with has been supportive of her service, and she can't wait to bring it to more businesses in 2020.

She's working with a local company to create a software program to automate her analytics. Currently, she does everything by hand herself.

Maggie Porter Kratz, who works with the Madison College Foundation, has known Beaver for six years and is continually inspired by her friend's skills.

"Samantha's whole being is fueled by her passion for language and her go-big-or-go-home spirit," Kratz says. "Her enthusiasm for linguistics is interesting and

infectious, and it draws people together."

With that attitude, Beaver is also hoping to draw students closer to language. She's working with her mother—a German teacher—to create a K-12 language program students around the state could attend.

LinguaZone follows the premise her mom teaches—bringing authentic immersion language experiences to children, rather than taking them out of the country to learn. (Beaver points out that traveling abroad may not be accessible for many families.)

"It's challenging for teachers to provide great immersion experiences, but we have fluent Spanish, French and other speakers in Madison," Beaver says. "We want to create a space for that authentic experience to occur right here."

LinguaZone would be an event teachers could bring their students to twice a year for both foreign-to-the-U.S. languages as well as English as a second language. Kids would learn from and practice with native language speakers.

Beaver says she's gotten some interest from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. She hopes to launch a pilot program this spring. If all goes well, the first LinguaZone would occur in December 2020.

According to Beaver, the hardest part about her work is getting people to believe in it, but she knows that will get easier with time.

"Introducing something new into the world is challenging, but it's important," Beaver says. "You have to have people understand it before you can make money off it" —Katy Macek

Samantha Beaver

