



EMPOWERING STAFF, ENGAGING COMMUNITY

Goodman Community Center's new leader shares her experience and vision.

BY KIMBERLY HAZEN

Leasha Nelson doesn't shy away from a challenge. Years ago, as a single mother of four during an early job as a kitchen assistant for a Girl Scouts camp, the camp director came to her and explained that the head cook had quit. Pushing a stack of cookbooks toward Nelson, the director said, "You're up."

Nelson laughs as she retells the story of how nervous she was about the offer. As one of the few African Americans at the camp that summer, and with no experience running a kitchen except for her own household, she felt out of her element. She would have to plan menus, order food, manage the budget, and above all, get organized.

However, the opportunity meant doubling her annual income for her and her four small children. "I wasn't confident in myself," she remembers. "I'm laughing about it now, but it wasn't funny at the time." She chuckles as she says, "I cried a little bit, and then I did it."

The raised fist and challenge accepted battle cry that Nelson learned early in her working years has served her well. Now, as the CEO and executive director of the Goodman Community Center (GCC), Nelson has brought her philosophy to Madison. The GCC provides programs for preschoolers through teens, families, individuals, and older adults, and those programs include on-site child care services, after-school programs, and a teen center. In addition, the center's food pantry serves more than 200 households a week.

You come to Madison from Memphis, but you're no stranger to Wisconsin, correct?

"I was born and raised in Milwaukee, and I'm very connected to that community, but I decided very long ago that I was going to move away and try to see what was beyond Milwaukee. My career launch pad was through Girl Scouts and that took me to different places."

Tell us about how your experience translates to GCC.

"I gained a lot of confidence working with the Girl Scouts. The organization taught me that I was a leader and people wanted to follow me — not because I was making them do something, but because they believed in what I was doing. It gave me a great sense of pride knowing I was helping young girls too. I didn't have everything I needed when I began with Girl Scouts, but through my over 17 years with them, I found myself gaining the pieces of the woman I wanted to be."

There are many correlations to the work at GCC in these aspects. In leading girls in the Girl Scouts organization, I realized that they are always watching you. They will see if you are a person of your word and the promises you've made with them are real. I think in my role now — the youth at the center, my staff, the community — they're still watching.

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— Leasha Nelson, Goodman Community Center

Where does your inspiration to lead come from?

"I think my power and inspiration come from every part of my life's journey up until this point. I think everything builds to the next thing. People would ask me all the time if I ever wanted to be a CEO, and I would always say no, but what I do know is that I've always wanted to reach further and be more impactful. I can do that with a greater role in this organization."

You've compared GCC to the image

of a tree with branches and leaves representing the board and the community. Now that you've been with the organization a while, does this comparison still stand?

"You know, the tree is still there, but I'm finding that just like everything when the seasons change, it's changing colors. I think that it's going through its metamorphosis."

GCC has been doing so well for 31 years with the leadership that was here. Now, we're making sure that all those roots of the tree are strong and are nurtured. One way is to make sure that all our staff are experts in their roles so that they can better serve the Madison community and each other.

That is the top [priority] on my list.

What other opportunities do you see for the organization?

"We can expand on what we do in college and career readiness. We do some work in this area, but I'd love to see us do more. A second opportunity would be to strengthen our parent engagement. I share this goal with everyone here."

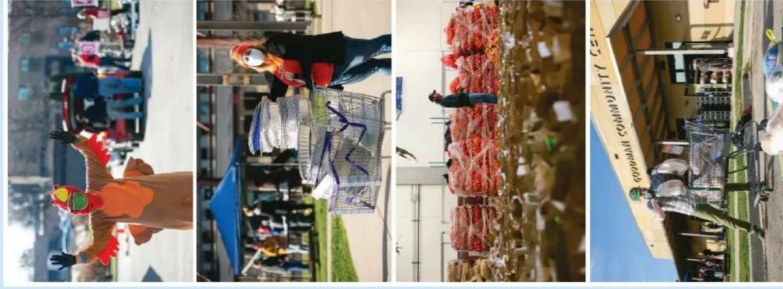
"Many times, we fill in the gaps for parents while their children are here, but we'd love to provide more opportunities for parents to engage with their children and with GCC."

"We have been fortunate and have made some really good decisions around what we're doing this next year. We're not going to go crazy and try to do 100 things."

What can the business community do for Goodman Community Center?

"The [Madison] business community would be a great resource to expose our community members to more experiences. We cook but it would be nice to shadow a professional chef. We garden but we have no experience working with a master gardener."

"Members of the business community, by lending their talents, could provide an endless array of experiences and opportunities for the community we serve."



Among the Goodman Community Center's many community-building activities is its annual Thanksgiving Basket Drive. Every year in November, the organization collects donations, rallies volunteers, and provides thousands of Dane County families with everything they need to make a Thanksgiving meal at home.