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NEWSMAKERS

25 Black Marylanders to Watch for 2023 (plus 5 Living Legends)

By Mekenzie Yee and Jill Sauer-Rodgers | Updated 10:30 PM ET Feb 28, 2023

Welcome to the 2023 edition of The Baltimore Sun's 25 Black Marylanders to Watch. To celebrate Black History Month, we've once again assembled a group of people from the realms of business, the arts, religion, politics and more whose visions for Baltimore and the state of Maryland make them worth watching.

In addition to these 25 on the rise, we're naming another five Living Legends, people who have made long-lasting contributions to their fields and who have paved the path to success for others to follow.

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ACTIVISM

Nykidra "Nyki" Robinson

Founder, Black Girls Vote

Staff Photo by Kevin Richardson/Sun

When Nykidra "Nyki" Robinson accompanied her mother to the polls as a child, there was a chance it all for her. Going behind the curtain impressed the importance of voting upon her from a young age.

"She wouldn't miss an election," Robinson said of her late mother.

Robinson, founder of Black Girls Vote, a nonpartisan voting rights organization, never thought she'd find her way into politics or running advocacy. Almost eight years in, her organization has expanded to more than 400 members and its colleagues chapters, including Morgan State University and University of Maryland, College Park, its newest chapter.

But when she thinks about what she wants her legacy to be, it's not just what she's accomplished professionally.

Robinson wants people to think of her as a resource, someone who can help people make connections and who supports her every step in life.

"I'm passionate about shifting the trajectory of our community," she said.

→ Sarah Koenig

JT Timpson

Managing Director, Community Violence Initiatives, Rosa Isaiport Institute

When Baltimore Ravs Ravens worker Dante Rochester was fatally shot in January 2022, his best friend and former colleague, JT Timpson, vowed to support employees on the front line of violence prevention programs.

That commitment inspired Timpson to step into a national role with Rosa, a youth violence prevention nonprofit. Timpson now travels across the country to teach other community violence initiative programs how to develop relationships with at-risk young people. Timpson was a founding director of Rosa Baltimore, which secured an influx of grant funding under his leadership and supports opt-young people. The organization also expanded into Baltimore County.

In his current position as managing director of community violence initiatives at the Rosa Isaiport Institute, Timpson trains probation departments and other nonprofits in the country on how to use Rosa's style of cognitive behavioral therapy to engage with young people and take care of their own workers.

"My drive is to really make sure people who sacrifice themselves as part of this work don't die in vain," Timpson said.

→ Lilly Price

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ARTS

Jonathan Heyward

Music director, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra

Staff Photo by Kevin Richardson/Sun

Jonathan Heyward doesn't begin his new job until this fall. But that doesn't mean he hasn't begun planning his inaugural season.

"My whole team is already working on the idea of how we can achieve the ideal of music for all," said Heyward, who was named music director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra last year.

"We're thinking about what that means and what will that look like in Baltimore. How long should concerts be and how should we program them?"

He has been impressed by the BSO's Fusion Series, which he said, "pairs Beethoven and Beyoncé in the same concert. Those are the kind of ideas we want to explore further."

Heyward is poised to become the only Black American conductor leading one of the two dozen biggest budget American orchestras when he takes the podium at Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall in September. He also will be the youngest, at age 34, when he starts the job.

He grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, in a family where music lessons were a luxury, but after picking up a cello for the first time at age 10, Heyward never looked back. He began a trajectory that took him to college at the Boston Conservatory at Berklee and graduate school at London's Royal Academy of Music.

Willie Heyward, an aspiring opera singer, and her listen husband where she played the clarinet during graduate school conducting workshops. Even then, she said, he stood out.

"It was like night and day," she said. "Jonathan would get up on the podium and immediately start producing sounds that would make people feel things. He is like a magician of music.

In 2019, Heyward defeated 300 other candidates to win a prestigious international competition for conductors in northeastern Poland. That led to appointments helping orchestras in England and Germany and a 2017 guest conducting gig leading the famed Los Angeles Philharmonic.

His success came as no surprise to his brother Anthony Heyward, a surgeon in the U.S. Army Reserve who said he learned command skills from watching his older brother conduct orchestras.

"Jonathan leads from the front," he said. "He will never ask someone to do something he wouldn't do himself. He's confident and passionate but he's also humble. That's rare, and it makes him an amazing leader."

→ Mary Carole McCauley

Rico Silva, aka DJ QuickSilva

Radio host, DJ and activist

Staff Photo by Kevin Richardson/Sun

"It's whom much is given, much is required," said DJ QuickSilva, quoting the Bible to explain why he's now time and energy to help people in his native Baltimore. A celebrated disc jockey and one-set personality at radio station 98Q, QuickSilva has established The Silva Lining Foundation, to assist children who've lost parents, launched a disc jockey school, founded a jib-finder company, and opened a nightspot, Club Downtown Brown, which employs about 20.

"I just want to be a blessing to others," said QuickSilva, aka Sam Robert "Rico" Silva. Raised in Northwood, he attended City College, earned national acclaim as a spin doctor and gives motivational talks to everyone from grade-schoolers to prison inmates.

In November, city officials honored him by renaming the street where he grew up, Hoadcroft Road, as QuickSilva Way. Come the holidays, he dishes out turkeys and toys to those in that neighborhood where, as a kid, he dreamed only of being "the best DJ on the block."

→ Mike Klingaman

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BUSINESS

Calvin Butler Jr.

President and CEO, Exelon Corp.

Staff Photo by Kevin Richardson/Sun

After nearly three decades carving out a career as a business leader, mostly in utilities in Baltimore, Calvin G. Butler Jr. has joined a group of only six other Black CEOs who lead a Fortune 500 company.

Butler was promoted Dec. 31 to president and CEO of Chicago-based energy giant Exelon Corp., which owns Baltimore Gas and Electric Co., replacing retiring CEO Chris Crane. Butler moved up the ranks from a BGE senior vice president to the CEO, then became CEO of Exelon Utilities. Then Exelon's chief operating officer and then president.

"Today, I am all-in now, but I should be one of many. To me, that means it's incredibly important to lead in a way that provides and creates opportunities for others," Butler said. "The most important responsibility I have in my current role is to ensure that all communities have equitable access to affordable and reliable power."

Butler previously worked from Exelon's Baltimore headquarters before the company split its utilities and power generation businesses last February, leaving power plant operations in the newly created Constellation Energy.

At CEO, Butler envisions leading Exelon and its 10 million customers, including those at three Maryland utilities, through an evolution to a clean energy future, while strengthening infrastructure, modernizing energy delivery and improving communities.

→ Lorraine Mirabella

Janet Currie

President, Bank of America, Greater Maryland

Staff Photo by Kevin Richardson/Sun

Janet Currie grew up in Washington, D.C., where she and her sister spent summers going to museums and were with their mother, a public school teacher.

"While she did not make a ton of money, I never really knew they had growing up," said Currie. "We were able to have those experiences that felt so rich."

After graduating from Spelman College in Atlanta, Currie moved to New York City and earned a master in accounting, but she knew New York wasn't for her. Her future husband was in Washington, D.C.—the moved back home. Together they raised two "grown-ish" children, Currie said.

Balancing family and work was challenging, Currie said, but one of her proudest achievements is her current role at Bank of America.

"I have spent roughly 30 years here, and some days that seem incredible, but I'm so blessed to be able to work for a company that I share values with," said Currie.

→ Giacomo Bologna

Mark Anthony Thomas

President and CEO, Greater Baltimore Committee

Staff Photo by Kevin Richardson/Sun

As a teenager in Atlanta, Mark Anthony Thomas became fascinated watching the city redevelop to host the 1996 Summer Olympics.

But he also despaired of the lack of investment in his own neighborhood, where his single mom struggled to support the family and the then 16-year-old worked two jobs to help pay bills. He wrote about economic disparities for his high school newspaper, planting seeds for the career ahead.

After steering economic development efforts in Atlanta, New York and Los Angeles and most recently president of the Pittsburgh Regional Alliance, Thomas, has landed in Baltimore. He emerged from a crowded field of candidates, becoming the first new head of the Greater Baltimore Committee in two decades and the business advocacy group's first Black president and CEO. The group merged last spring with the Economic Alliance of Greater Baltimore and longtime CEO Donald Fry retired.

Thomas believes his work examining urban problems over six years led him to the role. It was a goal he'd set years ago in his Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduate school application, saying, "I want to run a civic organization ... that brings business and thinkers together to solve the world's problems."

Still, he said he was unsure whether Baltimore should be his next move. Thomas considered the state's less-than business-friendly reputation, a city struggling with crime and lack of minority inclusion in economic development.

Then he thought about how his friends regard him as someone who "fixes cities."

"The sooner I kind of realized that's who I am in this world, then Baltimore made sense," he said.

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— Lorraine Mirabella

Alicia Wilson

Managing director of North American regional philanthropy, JPMorgan Chase

Jamie Kripke/Bloomberg News

Alicia Wilson doesn't want her story to sound exceptional. Wilson is now the managing director and head of North American regional philanthropy at JPMorgan Chase & Co., but growing up in East Baltimore she wasn't sure if she would be able to afford college.

"The thing that I could impress upon people is that my story should be the ordinary Baltimore story," Wilson said. "We have so much talent here that is wrapped up in the young people that are in city schools."

Wilson graduated from Morgan State University's Financial Technical High School, where she got an opportunity through a youth program called 100 Law that would prove life-changing. She said members from Kim Gallagher Evelton & Jones sponsored her internship at the Public Justice Center, where Wilson realized how much impact a lawyer can have on their community.

"That was the first time I met lawyers off of the television and came to understand the real significance that those seemingly successful people were able to have in the lives of people in Baltimore," Wilson said. "I knew lawyers were successful, I didn't probably fully appreciate … that lawyers do so much tremendous good."

With some aid from Collegebound Foundation, Wilson left Baltimore and attended University of Maryland, Baltimore County, then got her law degree from University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law. She clerked in the Circuit Court of Baltimore City, then worked at law firm Gordon Feinblatt and later with Sagamore Development, the organization behind the redevelopment of Port Covington, now renamed Baltimore Peninsula.

Most recently she was vice president for economic development and community partnerships at the Johns Hopkins University, where Wilson said she's looking forward to driving investment in underserved neighborhoods.

When she's not working, Wilson said she loves to play games and eat crabs. During the conversation, she mentioned her son's upcoming birthday and asked for the children, whom Julia learned to make spaghetti Bolognese, pancakes and more.

"Make sure this gets printed," Wilson said. "I am an amazing Uno champion and I love fishing."

— Giacomo Bologna

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EDUCATION

Brauwville G. Bard Jr.

Vice president for public safety, Johns Hopkins University

At the forefront of the Johns Hopkins University private police launch stands Brauwville G. Bard Jr., the school's vice president for public safety, attempting to build a model force from the ground up with much community pushback.

Since the dawn of Hopkins' push for a private armed police department, community members have voiced various concerns including potential racial profiling and abuses of power. When George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police in 2020, Hopkins said it would pause the police force — then still being developed — for two years. In 2022, the university hired Bard to run the program, and since summer 2022, Hopkins has started to roll out officers, about to get its private police force up and running despite several disruptive protests.

Late last year, Bard co-signed the firm's memorandum of understanding with Baltimore Police Department Commissioner Michael Harrison. The document outlines jurisdictional duties between the two entities.

"I'm here, I'm present," Bard said of those who have raised concerns. "I share the same concerns."

As Bard moves into the program's next phase of development, he said he is concerned what he's done since the beginning — working with the community and trying to bring more awareness to the police force's work that he said seldom involves the use of force or arrests.

Those responsibilities range from the Behavioral Health Crisis Support Team, which responds to mental health issues, to officers helping students navigate campus. Bard said there have been more than ten success stories that arose from the Behavioral Health Crisis Support Team and that the program is poised to expand.

When the DPD becomes operational, which could happen later this year, Bard said the force should reduce the university's reliance on the Baltimore Police Department and increase police response times on campus. He said this will also allow BPD, which has struggled with staffing issues, to focus on policing other parts of the city.

Bard said the program's influence could span beyond Baltimore and serve as a model to others since this DPD allows him and his team to build a culture from the ground up, something uncommon on other police forces.

— Sabrina Lobenaj

Mark Bedell

Superintendent, Anne Arundel County Public Schools

Jeffrey F. Bishop/Capital Gazette

When Anne Arundel County Public Schools Superintendent Mark Bedell was a sophomore in high school, a teacher pulled him aside to tell him he was academically talented — and risked throwing it all away.

At the time, he was grappling with social and emotional struggles brought on by a difficult childhood. That same teacher also predicted Bedell would one day make an excellent educator.

Since then, Bedell says he's "traveled a narrow path" to a career that's taken him to Houston, Baltimore County, Kansas City, Missouri, and now to Anne Arundel County, where he carries the distinction of being the first Black man to lead the school system.

He plans to embrace equity and innovation as well as social, emotional, and academic growth, with the goal of pushing each student to their fullest potential. That means devising an approach for a county school system that serves urban, suburban and rural pockets of Maryland.

In the coming year, Bedell plans to focus on crafting a year strategic plan for the system that aligns with the state's educational reform plan, called the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

"I'm not interested in it just being good," he said of Anne Arundel schools. "It's about being great."

— Lillian Reed

Sonja Santelises

CEO, Baltimore City Public Schools

Jared Wickerham/Getty Images

Baltimore City Public Schools CEO Sonja Santelises slaps away from talking about accomplishments during her six years leading the school system. It's easier to talk about her goals for the years ahead.

"It's hard to do when you're judging yourself," she said.

The renowned administrator was a finalist in 2020 for the nation's top award in urban education leadership, bestowed every other year by the Council of the Great City Schools. That was also the year a global pandemic shuttered city school buildings and threatened to derail the work she and other top leaders were doing.

Still, the work families and her team planted, including literacy tutoring, expanded summer programming and wraparound services for students, just before the pandemic may be starting to take root.

A "bright spot" Bedell is Baltimore City schools' National Assessment of Educational Progress scores this fall, when the federal standardized test measuring student proficiency in reading and math revealed the city had fared better in several key categories than Maryland as a whole.

For example, eighth grade reading scores managed to hold steady compared with scores collected in 2019. And some subgroups, including Hispanic students and Black economically disadvantaged students, scored slightly higher on the test than they did in the year before the pandemic. These same groups saw declines statewide.

Santelises' list of concerns has lengthened since the pandemic began. The school system still faces serious academic challenges made more difficult by years of historical inequity and high concentrations of poverty.

"We're making progress on things like literacy, but we need to get back on track," she said.

Over the next decade, Santelises is expecting an infusion of cash from the state thanks to a landmark education reform initiative called the Blueprint for Maryland's Future. Blueprint funds are being directed toward things like mental health services, middle school athletics and arts programming — offerings that Santelises hopes will address the needs of the "whole student."

In 2019, the city school leader is preparing to roll out a budget plan that will accelerate high school and reimagine what she calls the "portrait of a city school graduate," and the system is doubling down this year on literacy interventions by piloting a ninth grade reading course.

Santelises is excited about the momentum building in the city school system.

"We were already pushing," she said. "Now we've got to make go around."

— Lillian Reed

Valerie Shearer-Ashby

President, UMBC

Jared Wickerham/Getty Images

Last August, the University of Maryland, Baltimore County welcomed Valerie Shearer-Ashby as its new president, the first woman to fill this role at the university.

Shearer-Ashby said her goal would be to continue the institution's commitment to "inclusive excellence" in higher education.

"In my first months at UMBC, I have been inspired again and again by our community, and the collective dedication to bringing our vision to the world," Shearer-Ashby said in a January news release announcing UMBC BoR, an initiative that focuses on conversations about values, challenges and aspirations for the university.

Shearer-Ashby, the former dean of Duke University's Trinity College of Arts & Sciences in North Carolina, is dedicated to being a role model for her students, faculty and staff.

"The mentor piece is an important part of my life, and so that's another thing that is attractive to me about UMBC — this really committed mentorship of the students where we really think about how do we maximize their success," Ashby said after her appointment in 2021. "It's not in that place and be that person for somebody else, that is thrilling to me."

— Baltimore Sun Staff

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FOOD

David and Tonya Thomas

Co-owners, Hyfleum Food Group

Jared Wickerham/Getty Images

Baltimoreans may have encountered David and Tonya Thomas while dining at Ida B's Table or Herb & Soul Gastro Café & Lounge, the restaurants they used to run.

But the couple's culinary and cultural work extends far beyond restaurant walls.

Through their new venture, the Hyfleum Food Group, the Thomases share modern soul food at events held around the region as well as through pop-up at The Sterling, the Orangeville venue where their catering company is based.

Education and mentorship are a focus for the Baltimore-based couple, who were both named mentors for the Legacy Network, a program organized by the prodigious James Beard Foundation to support Black American and Indigenous people within the culinary industry.

Another project, a 48-acre farm in Baltimore County where the Thomases plan to grow crops indigenous to the area, will be an opportunity to preserve and share Black food history in Maryland.

"I don't know that you can have a conversation about food in this country without talking about African Americans and food," David Thomas said. "Very often, we're locked out of the narrative."

— Amanda Yeager

Najiha Wright-Brown

Co-founder, Vegan Soulfood and The Land of Kush restaurant

Jared Wickerham/Getty Images

Before she opened one of Baltimore's beloved vegan restaurants, Najiha Wright-Brown was an enthusiastic meat and dairy eater.

"I was living good, or thought I was, enjoying all this stuff," she said.

A visit to the doctor shifted her perspective. Wright-Brown learned she had high cholesterol and set about changing her diet.

"I'm hubsch. I don't like to take drugs," she said. "I had to figure out how to improve my health."

The answer, for her, was to cut the meat and dairy. More than a decade later, Wright-Brown is working to help others make similar shifts.

She and her husband, Gregory Brown, are the owners of The Land of Kush, a vegan restaurant on the edge of Reisterstown that plays plant-based cuisine doesn't have to be limited to salads and tofu scramblers.

At The Land of Kush, the couple pairs a vegan spin on soul food classics like ribs, mac 'n cheese and collard greens. Plant-based "crab" cakes are another top-selling item, and made PETA's nationwide list of Top 10 vegan seafood dishes in 2018.

She has been active in spreading the vegan gospel, starting Vegan Soulfood in 2014, a food and music festival. Soulfood took a break during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it's back on again this year. Wright-Brown said she's already sold 1,000 tickets for the two-day event, scheduled for Aug. 19-20.

She also teamed up with Sam Chasanoff, the owner of Hampden's Golden West Cafe, to start Maryland Vegan Restaurant Month. The promotion shines a spotlight on restaurants offering vegan options every spring and summer. And through a nonprofit, the Black Veg Society, she organizes tasting events that offer inner-city communities the opportunity to sample vegan food products.

Wright-Brown, who describes herself as someone who constantly has several projects cooking at once, she doesn't plan on slowing down anytime soon. In the years to come, she wants to expand South Vegan Soulfood and Maryland Vegan Restaurant Month. She also started "Najiha Speaks," an online talk show that catches up with advocates of vegan living.

The Land of Kush opened 10 years ago, at one of the very first Black-owned vegan businesses in the city. The scene has greatly expanded to the years since, adding spots like My Mama's Vegan, Dedali's Kitchen, Gangster Vegan Organics and Cajun Creamery.

Wright-Brown sees the growing number of vegan restaurants as an opportunity to teach more people about the benefits of a plant-based diet.

"There's enough for everyone to go around," she said. "We're all in this together."

— Amanda Yeager

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LIVING LEGENDS

Thelma T. Daley

Civil rights advocate

(Amy Davis/Amy Davis)

Civil rights advocate Thelma T. Daley ended her term as chair and president of the National Council of Negro Women in December, the last to serve in the role as the organization shifts to a new structure this year.

During her 11-month tenure, the national organization raised money to plant more than 100,000 trees in Haiti, Mali and Senegal; held its first virtual-hybrid convention and listed its Pennsylvania Avenue headquarters on the National Registry of Historic Places.

“Every goal I set out to do, I did it,” the Pikesville resident said.

Inspired by her parents’ civic engagement when she was growing up in Anne Arundel County, Daley has long been politically active on the local and national level, from participating in the 1963 March on Washington to serving as national director of women in the NAACP.

A college professor who previously directed counseling programs for Baltimore County Public Schools, Daley became the first Black president of both the American School Counselor Association and the American Counseling Association.

Richard Yep, who served as CEO of the American Counseling Association for more than 30 years, said Daley has continued to steer the trajectory of the world’s largest counseling association and has mentored newcomers.

“This is a phrase that’s overused, but she really is a trailblazer,” Yep said. “Without Thelma, I don’t know if the association would still exist.”

Former U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexis Herman, who also counts Daley as a mentor, called her a true “Renaissance woman.” The two met when Daley inaugurated Herman, who served under President Bill Clinton, into the Delta Sigma Theta sorority. “She doesn’t take no for an answer,” Herman said.

Herman said Daley often notes that leaders who break gender or racial barriers are only as significant as what they achieve in those positions. Daley’s lasting impact on the groups she has led extends beyond the milestone of simply being “the first,” Herman said.

“It’s great from a history perspective to be a pioneer, to break those barriers as she has done in her life. But you have to make a difference,” she said.

— Cassidy Jensen

Darryl Hill

Former University of Maryland football player

Darryl Hill speaks during induction into Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame Class of 2022 at MartinÕs West. Oct. 13, 2022. (Kenneth K. Lam/Baltimore Sun)

Darryl Hill didn’t want to be Jackie Robinson.

He didn’t want to be under a “microscope” but rather a “normal college student,” he recalled in October as he was inducted into the Maryland State Athletic Hall of Fame. But he received letters from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and former U.S. Rep. John Lewis, who encouraged him to transfer to the University of Maryland and become the first African American football player in the Atlantic Coast Conference in 1963.

Decades later, noted sports analyst Lee Corso — who had been a Maryland assistant — told Hill that it was Hill’s mother who had asked King and Lewis to encourage Hill to become a pioneer at Maryland.

Hill, the first Black scholarship athlete in any sport south of the Mason-Dixon Line, faced vitriol and saw a Terrapin statue hung by a noose during a road game. But the wide receiver excelled, setting a then-ACC record for touchdown receptions in a single season. In 2021, Maryland football’s training complex, the Jones-Hill House, was named in part after him.

— Hayes Gardner

Adrienne A. Jones

House Speaker, Maryland House of Delegates

(Barbara Haddock Taylor/Baltimore Sun)

While Marylanders continue to take note of their first Black governor, many may be unaware of the numerous glass ceilings shattered by House Speaker Adrienne A. Jones.

Born in Cowdensville, Jones was elected to the Maryland House of Delegates in 1997. She became both the first woman and first Black Speaker of the House following the death of Speaker Michael E. Busch days before the end of the 2019 legislative session.

“It’s not something I take lightly,” Jones said of her role on the first day of the 2023 legislative session.

Busch was the speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates from 1983 to 2019. Jones served as his second-in-command for 16 years.

When she was nominated to return as the House Speaker at the start of the 2023 session, Baltimore Del. Stephanie Smith described Jones as “the epitome of class, dignity and grace under pressure” and “the jewel of Baltimore County.” House Health and Government Operations Vice Chair Ariana Kelly said that Jones held the chamber together after the unexpected loss of Busch and the difficulties the chamber faced during the pandemic.

Jones, a mother and grandmother, received her bachelor’s of arts degree in psychology from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Before her tenure as a member of the House of Delegates, she served as the director of the Baltimore County Office of Minority Affairs from 1989 to 1995.

Jones was also the director of Baltimore County’s Office of Fair Practices and Community Affairs from 1995 to 2011 and the jurisdiction’s deputy director of human resources from 2011 through 2014.

Before she was chosen by her colleagues to lead the chamber as the Speaker of the House, Jones sat on the powerful House Appropriations Committee, which oversees the budget alongside the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee.

Jones has shepherded landmark legislation to the governor’s desk, including 2021′s sweeping police reform bill, expansion of abortion care and the Blueprint for Maryland’s Future education.

“This is Annapolis,” Jones said after she secured her fourth term as speaker earlier this year. “In Annapolis we get things done and we do it in decency and order. We respect each other. We work across the aisle and across the hall and we start on time.”

— Hannah Gaskill

Melvin N. Miles Jr.

Former band director, Morgan State University

(Staff photo by Jen Rynda)

At Morgan State University’s homecoming parade last fall, Melvin N. Miles, Jr. finally got to participate separate from the band, which he had been part of since 1970.

“I felt really like a kid,” said Miles, who was named the Homecoming Grand Marshall.

Miles learned music through the Baltimore City Public School System. He transferred to Morgan State University midway through his bachelor’s degree and joined the band. After graduation, the university hired Miles to direct the very ensemble he played in.

He stayed in the role throughout the entirety of his career.

Of everything Miles achieved in his 49-year stint with Morgan State, programming to prestigious performances, he said he’s most proud to have been a part of his students’ lives and watch them grow.

“I had an opportunity to participate in the lives of some people who have gone on to be successful,” Miles said. “And for me, that’s the neatest thing.”

— Sabrina LeBoeuf

The Rev. Douglas B. Sands

Civil rights activist and former pastor, White Rock Independent Methodist Episcopal Church, Sykesville

(Kim Hairston/Baltimore Sun)

It would be hard to think of a Marylander whose life has more closely tracked the arc of the civil rights movement, and who has done more to propel it, than the Rev. Douglas B. Sands.

Raised in rural Cooksville in a log cabin without running water or electricity, he was a star student and the 1952 valedictorian at Harriet Tubman School in Howard County. As a Morgan State University undergrad, he helped organize some of America’s first successful civil rights protests, efforts that led to the landmark integration of restaurants and theaters in the neighborhood.

Maryland’s 21st governor, J. Millard Tawes, took note of Sands’ work, naming him director of a new state commission on “interracial problems and relations.” He went on to hold similar posts with the U.S. State Department in the 1960s, the Howard County chapter of the NAACP in the 1970s, and the cabinet of Maryland Gov. Harry Hughes in the 1980s. Sands used his influence to help desegregate whites-only restaurants along U.S. Route 40 and to promote minority housing rights, voting rights and business ownership.

“It’s not so much that I kept moving up in the world, it’s that the negotiating skills I managed to develop were transferable to so many different settings,” said Sands, who retired as a pastor in 2019.

During more than 40 years as a Methodist preacher, Sands also lent support to small, predominantly Black churches in the belief that they teach universal values.

Among his current activities is working with the Preachers’ Hall of Fame, a regional group.

“We’ll keep doing the best we can with what we have to do. [It’s] what Jesse Jackson first talked about — keeping hope alive,” he said.

— Jonathan M. Pitts

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HEALTH

David Olawuyi Fakunle

Chair, Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission; executive director, WombWork Productions

(Schaun Champion)

David Olawuyi Fakunle didn’t see any of this coming.

When he started his undergraduate education at the University of Maryland, he wanted to be an aerospace engineer.

But today, Fakunle — who was born and raised in East Baltimore — chairs the Maryland Lynching Truth and Reconciliation Commission and is executive director of WombWork Productions, a Baltimore social justice performing arts center.

Fakunle, a public health professor at Johns Hopkins University and Morgan State University, also has carved out a niche for himself in the field, where he advocates for the importance of storytelling.

While he was pursuing his doctorate at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, he and his mother started DiscoverME/RecoverME, an organization that encourages people to use storytelling for healing and growth.

“Why does it matter? Why should I care? Those very basic questions are ones that storytelling advances,” he said of the role storytelling should play in public health. “If no one cares about what we’re doing, then why are we doing it?”

— Angela Roberts

Stacey Stephens

Director, B’more for Healthy Babies and early learning programming at Promise Heights, University of Maryland School of Social Work

(Barbara Haddock Taylor/Baltimore Sun)

Stacey Stephens, a second-generation social worker who grew up watching her parents develop deep relationships with their patients, always knew she would devote her life to health care.

Since becoming a social worker almost three decades ago, her work has focused on maternal and child health. For about 12 years, she has worked with the Promise Heights initiative and the University of Maryland School of Medicine, directing the B’more for Healthy Babies program in the Druid Heights and Upton neighborhoods of West Baltimore.

In 2011, when Stephens joined B’more for Healthy Babies, Promise Heights — an initiative run out of the University of Maryland School of Social Work that aims to ensure a healthy future for every baby born in Druid Heights and Upton — the infant mortality rate for the two communities was 14.3 deaths per 1,000 live births.

But during the pandemic, as the country weathered a run of tragedies, a group of neighborhood moms met virtually to celebrate some good news: The infant mortality rate fell to a historic low of 3.8 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2019, and there was no racial disparity in the deaths.

In 2020, the most recent data available, there were 5.6 deaths per 1,000 live births in the neighborhood.

While Stephens relishes the program’s impact, there’s more to be done. She dreams of everyone in the two communities having optimal health and well-being — when babies not only live past the age of 5 but grow up to have healthy babies of their own.

“When we see that — and changes in the built and lived conditions and structures, eliminating racism,” she said, “then I think we can all celebrate.”

— Angela Roberts

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LEGAL

Ivan Bates

Baltimore City State’s Attorney

(Kevin Richardson / Baltimore Sun)

As a child in Hampton, Virginia in the 1980s, Ivan Bates rode the bus every day from his predominantly African American neighborhood to a school in a majority white district.

Three decades after attorney Thurgood Marshall, who went on to become the first Black justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, successfully argued that racial segregation of public schools is unconstitutional, Bates experienced an America still falling short.

While Bates dreamt of being a lawyer, he recalled feeling discouraged when a “scholastic aptitude” test in eighth grade suggested “a plumber or a brick mason.” His attention drifted away from school — until he began to understand how people like Marshall fought so he could be in the classroom. After serving in the U.S. Army, he earned a degree from Howard University.

“When I thought about going to law school, he was really the only Black lawyer that I knew,” Bates said of Marshall.

Bates graduated from Williams & Mary Law School in 1995 and began a legal career that has, so far, spanned more than 25 years and culminated with his swearing-in as Baltimore State's Attorney.

Bates said he's keeping his "terms" and his office working office of a challenging time.

For eight years running, the city has surpassed 300 homicides. His office has been battered by prosecutor attrition. Also short-staffed, the police department remains under a federal consent decree for widespread civil rights violations.

"Baseball was never alright. I've endured the loss and he learned to use it for his people," Bates said.

The Democrat has promised to attack the gun violence epidemic without resorting to broken windows policing, which led to a decade-long incarceration of minorities. Some criminal justice experts raised concerns about his criminating the prosecution of certain low-level offenses.

Just like the majority of his clients over decades as a defense attorney, Bates said, most of the people he offer prosecutors are Black. He wants his prosecutors to master the law's nuance like Marshall, he held offenders accountable while giving deserving people second chances.

"I'm not doing it from a position that I just want to put people in jail, I'm doing it from a position that when I look, the victims of these crimes tend to look like me. Now I'm representing the victims. I'm now making sure that we protect the citizens," Bates said. "But I feel we don't make a one size fits all in terms of every single sentence."

— Alex Blum

Natasha Dartigue

Maryland public defender

Natasha Dartigue

A daughter of Haitian immigrants, Natasha Dartigue was supposed to be a medical student, the Long Island, New York native having majored in biology as an undergraduate.

Fast forward more than three decades and Dartigue is the Maryland public defender, having been appointed to the office in May. She is the first person of color to hold the position, and her cultural identity gives it greater meaning.

"As a woman of color when I come into certain spaces and speak about [criminal justice] issues, it is more personal," she said.

Dartigue graduated from Howard University's law school in 1995 and began her legal career as a law clerk for the late Baltimore Circuit Judge Roger W. Brown. Dartigue then joined the city public defender's office, where she got a taste of what it was like to represent the indigent, visiting jails and prisons. It was supposed to be a five-year plan, Dartigue said, with her eyes set on returning to New York after getting some experience.

"If you had told my family something will be fast-forward 26 years and I would be the public defender and throughout my career I would have been going in and out of institutions, I would have laughed," Dartigue said.

To be a public defender is to accept that every day is an uphill battle; whether it's against the court system, the prosecutors or the public.

"It's not for the faint of heart, because we are people of their most difficult and desperate moments," Dartigue said. "But there's something so beautiful about sitting next to someone and being able to connect with them, and then having faith that during that 9 to five first time they're actually heard."

One of Dartigue's top priorities, she said, is to ensure her staff, from the attorneys to the social workers to the paralegals, have the resources and advice they need to stay with the work.

"Having been a public defender my entire legal career, I understand the needs of the people I lead," Dartigue said.

— Ian St. Sanderlin

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POLITICS

Wes Moore

Governor, Maryland

Andrew Harnik/AP Photo/Pool Photo

On the morning of his historic inauguration last month, Wes Moore stood in the one-along the water in downtown Annapolis and swayed as he sang.

"I'm gonna keep on walking, keep on talking, marching to the freedom land," he quietly sang along to poet Early Brian's rendition of the civil rights anthem, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round," in the spot where enslaved African-ones arrived on Maryland's shores.

The moment marked the beginning of a day packed with events that would where referred to as "uneven and unimaginable progress."

"It's impossible not to think about our past, and our path," Moore said in his inaugural address as he became Maryland's first Black governor and the only current Black governor in the country.

Moore's own path is lessening Maryland's chief executive and a rising star in national Democratic politics has had many chapters.

He was a Rhodes scholar, served as a White House fellow in the State Department, led paratroopers in Afghanistan, worked as an investment banker in London and New York, become a bestselling author, started a production company and ran one of the country's largest poverty-fighting nonprofits.

His winding path and growing profile over the years led many in Maryland political circles to wonder when – and if – he would run for office.

Moore launched his campaign in 2022 and went on to defeat a robust field of experienced Democrats in the primary and a Republican backed by former President Donald Trump in November.

Now, in just a few weeks in office, he's moved ahead with campaign pledges to expand public service opportunities, further fund education and transportation projects and give a financial boost to veterans.

"I love the fact that we, and this team, that we have a chance to actually do something about this stuff now and not just kind of shaking our fists at it," Moore said.

How Moore proceeds in his first term, and potentially beyond, will be closely watched. And not just by Marylanders.

His burgeoning national profile – from the transportation introduction by Oprah Winfrey, his friend, to the litany of national television appearances – is already putting him in conversations as a future presidential candidate.

Moore, for his part, has turned all questions about his political future back to the state to now leads.

"Today is not the victory. Today is the beginning," he said toward the end of his inaugural speech. "It is our opportunity to lead with love. It is our opportunity to create with compassion. It's our opportunity to fight fearlessly for our future."

— Sam Janesch

Torrey Snow

Talk show host

Courtesy Torrey Snow

Torrey Snow was imagined saving souls as a Christian ministerin. As a WBAL Radio talk show host, he's still in the permission business.

"I'm a social justice evangelical to the conservatives," Snow says with a laugh.

As a Black conservative, Snow feels he can bridge the divides of race and politics, although his lifelong idealism has been tested by today's fractious climate. Now, she was unsuccessfully as a Republican in and for the Anne Arundel County Council, left the party about 10 years ago — in protest, he says, of former President Donald Trump's continuing influence.

A married father of four who lives in Odenton, Snow said he believes Black people should be "active participants" in the G.O.P.

"American history is Black history," he said.

"Torrey and Dan," co-hosted with Dan Joseph, airs weekdays from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. While he'll take on the occasional "red meat, go after the welfare" topic, he says he prefers more thoughtful fare.

"My goal," Snow said, "is to bring people together."

— Jean Marbella

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RELIGION

The Rev. Natalie Conway

Deacon, Mennonite Episcopal Church

Jerry Jones/ Baltimore Sun

Not long after becoming the first Black deacon of Mennonite Episcopal Church in Bolton Hill, the Rev. Natalie Conway made a point of shuttling discussions — first that the family of the prominent pastor who had founded the church in 1860s Charles Ridgely Howard, were shareholders at the Hampton Plantation north of Baltimore, and second, that the people they'd ostracized included some of her own ancestors.

The Baltimore native was tempted to quit, but she decided the news might be an opportunity for healing. Conway led a series of events aimed at helping her congregation process the news, including a ceremonial pouring of holy water at the plantation, now a site on the National Register of Historic Places. She gave talks and interviews on the importance of facing hard truths and practicing forgiveness. And she looked, as grafted, in areas as her mostly white congregation voted unanimously to create a legacy fund to support projects aimed at "repairing the breach" between African Americans and whites in the neighborhood.

The landmark fund came in addition to a similar one of its million created a year earlier by Maryland's Episcopal diocese, which, like Mennonite, was already in the process of reparations by its own historic complicity in advancing white supremacist causes.

She continues to receive invitations to share her story and plans to set up an educational program for those who have recently been released from prison.

"All these little things are adding up to make us all more 'one' than 'us versus them,' she says. "I hope I've helped contribute to that."

— Jonathan M. Pitts

The Rev. Rodney Hudson

Pastor, Ames Memorial United Methodist and Metropolitan United Methodist churches, founding director, Resurrection Sandtown

Kim Hairston/Baltimore Sun

When the Rev. Rodney Hudson arrived as the new pastor of Ames Memorial United Methodist Church in Sandtown-Winchester, the poverty, crime and apparent hopelessness he saw struck him as overwhelming. Fifteen years later, it's clear it was no such thing.

The Maryland native, a painter's son, started small, reaching out to young men he saw idling in the streets. A few responded, taking advantage of Ames' new soup kitchen, even attending services. By 2004, amid the unrest that exploded following the death of Sandtown resident Freddie Gray in police custody, he knew enough residents to be able to disarm some and calm others, helping a sudden of pastors quell the unrest. He has since worked to address the conditions he believes led to the tragedy, including police misconduct, a lack of recreational programs and a dearth of resources.

Hudson had spent a dozen years trying to raise funds for a new activity center in the neighborhood, and last year, when an area supply company donated more than 40,000 square feet of warehouse space, a gift valued at $2.5 million, near Ames, his Resurrection Sandtown dream came to life. It already offers food and clothing pressers, job training programs, and computer space for anyone who needs it.

Hudson is now working to add senior housing and affordable medical facilities.

"I see change all around our city, where people are trying to bring hope and healing it happen," Hudson says. "I want to be part of that."

— Jonathan M. Pitts

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SPORTS

Sashi Brown

President, Baltimore Ravens

Staff Photo/Kevin Richardson/Staff

Sashi Brown, only the second Black team president in NFL history, has had an eventful first year since succeeding Dick Cass in April.

On the field, the Ravens and a sidelined quarterback Lamar Jackson came up short in the playoffs, losing on a tie to the Cincinnati Bengals in the wild-card round.

Off the field, where Brown oversees all business areas of the organization, including finances, stadium/field personnel and operations, the Ravens in early January received final approval after negotiations with the Maryland Stadium Authority to extend their lease of M&T Bank Stadium for an more seasons, through 2027, and potentially through the 2027 season.

"We want to make sure that we continue to be that beacon for the community and beyond," Brown said in an interview after the board's vote. "What we do on the field also travels off the field, which we've done – tens of millions of dollars invested in the greater Baltimore community. So I think that's what the community is getting. It's incredibly important and vital for the Ravens."

With a new lease in place, the Ravens plan to use more millions to remake their stadium, and they're considering digging out the rest of its lower level. The ambitious project would open opportunities to indulge spectators' desire to see and hear the game from the players' perspective, rather than the field's eye-level of a seating chart.

"We are looking at all those types of things, that the fans, essentially, is how to get people closer to the live action," Brown said.

Brown came to Baltimore after serving as president of Monumental Basketball, an umbrella organization that includes each Tod Leonardo-owned holdings and the Washington Wizards. He also was an executive in football and business operations for the Jacksonville Jaguars and Cleveland Browns.

Brown said at his introductory news conference in March that replacing Cass, who recommended Brown for his post NFL job, left him with "big shoes" to fill.

"It places a lot of responsibility on you," he said. "Dick has just been such a comprehensively good leader, and he's focused on the right things. He's led through crises – he's just been a model, he's been great that way. And then I look at, I mean, my life, shoes. Now it's on me. And so, from my perspective, I really take it seriously, in terms of the responsibility that ... you take that baton, and you have to continue to carry it, you have to a relay and track-and-field analogy. And so I think I'm up to the challenge."

— Jonas Shaffer

Al Hutchinson

President and CEO, Visit Baltimore

Courtesy Al Hutchinson

Al Hutchinson – head of Baltimore's quasi-public tourism agency – estimates that he spent 90% of his work life last year traveling to trade shows and sales events across the country. Living out of a suitcase doesn't faze Hutchinson though.

"I've been doing this for 30-plus years," he said with a laugh. "So this is not a new rodeo to me."

In fact, meeting potential customers in their home markets is an essential task for Hutchinson, who saw competition from cities such as Charleston, Cleveland and Louisville, Kentucky at the same events. "Everybody is out selling their destinations, and if we don't do that for Baltimore, we will falter," he said.

A Virginia native who was named to his current position in 2016, Hutchinson has helped cities such as Charleston, Mobile, Alabama, and Virginia Beach, Virginia, attract visitors.

Hutchinson said Baltimore's tourism industry has just over nearly 70% of what they were in 2019 as the tourism and hospitality industries nationwide continue to recover from the pandemic.

"This is a very critical time for all of us," he said. "We want to do our part to bring as much business – both convention business and leisure travel business – back to the community."

Hutchinson said recent increases in CPG Bank revenue, the agency's tourism promotion arm, and the opening of the Baltimore Peninsula are encouraging developments post-pandemic. Last month's CPG Lacrosse convention capped a year that included the city hosting the National Intercollegiate Athletics championship men's and women's basketball

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tournaments almost a year ago and the Maryland Cycling Classic on Labor Day weekend.

With the Maryland Cycling Classic returning later this year, the CIAA Tournaments staying in Baltimore through 2025, and the Army-Navy football game coming back to M&T Bank Stadium in 2025, Hutchinson is optimistic about the future.

But Hutchinson said he doesn't intend to rest just yet. "We're always looking for more opportunities," he said.

— Edward Lee

Lindsey Spann

Assistant coach and recruiting coordinator, Maryland women's basketball team

(Kenneth K. Lam/Baltimore Sun)

Having just turned 27 in December, Lindsey Spann, an assistant coach and recruiting coordinator for the Maryland women's basketball team, is closer in age to the players she's tasked with molding than the head coach who hired her in 2019, Brenda Frese.

But don't let the former Penn State and South Carolina shooting guard's youth fool you.

Spann grew up in Laurel and graduated from Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic High School in Olney. Last year, she was named by Silver Waves Media as one of the Most Impactful Assistant Coaches in the sport. That followed her being cited in 2021 as one of the Women's Basketball Coaches Association's Thirty Under 30 honorees.

Spann, who scored more than 1,000 points in three seasons with the Nittany Lions, earned a bachelor's in public relations from Penn State University in 2017 and a master's in sport and entertainment management from University of South Carolina in 2019.

— Edward Lee

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