

## FACE TIME

# 'We need to cultivate more diverse leadership in the business community.'

Nekima Levy-Pounds in May was elected Minneapolis chapter president of the NAACP. The fully tenured University of St. Thomas law professor ran unopposed for the position with an aim to rejuvenate a chapter that had fallen somewhat dormant.

Levy-Pounds also is an advocate for Black Lives Matter in Minneapolis. She participated in December in the Black Lives Matter rally at Mall of America, where she was charged with eight misdemeanor counts from the city of Bloomington related to the protest. Three of the charges, all related to trespassing, have been subsequently dropped; the others are pending.

Levy-Pounds recently sat down to talk to the *Business Journal* about racial disparity in the Twin Cities and about a few initiatives of the NAACP. Below is part of that conversation, edited for length and clarity.

**What can be done to close the employment gap in Minnesota between whites and nonwhites?** We need to cultivate more diverse leadership in the business community. It's not going to happen through osmosis or through the passage of time. It takes being intentional about being inclusive and inviting people into the fold and training them and mentoring them and making sure they have adequate opportunity. I don't think that's happening on the scale it should be happening.

**How can businesses begin to improve the racial balance?** There's a need to change how we view who's qualified for certain positions. Some jobs have an expectation of a bachelor's degree, for example. Perhaps it's time to revisit some of those qualifications to see if they're actually necessary.

**Why did the NAACP fight to repeal lurking and spitting laws in Minneapolis?** They were low-level, antiquated ordinances that really were

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**Title:** Volunteer position as president, NAACP-Minneapolis; professor, University of St. Thomas School of Law; activist, Black Lives Matter

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not benefiting anyone because of the cost to enforce them. They're used as a pretext to stop and frisk certain people, primarily African American young men. The laws were repealed, but not without controversy and without a clash with business leaders. My expectation would have been for business leaders to reach out to civil rights advocates to actually hear our perspective and to understand the harms that were occurring, but that didn't happen.

**How are Minnesota employers doing with their support of communities of color?** There are some companies that do a better job with community outreach than others through their foundations, but there's often a disconnect with its business practices. For example, [the NAACP] would like Target to change its hiring practices and allow people with a criminal history to work there, including those with felony records. Target Foundation does a lot of good work in the community and they contribute to a lot of wonderful causes that assist with people of color, but I also see the flip side about how some of the practices actually have a detrimental impact on communities of color when we're not giving people second chances.

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Law professor Nekima Levy-Pounds was elected in May president of the Minneapolis chapter of the NAACP.

NANCY KUEH