

Extending a Branch

African American Philanthropy Committee influences past, present and future givers

Left to right: **Steve Sanders**, AAPC member; **Ron Johnson**, AAPC co-chair; **Michele Ghee**, former CEO of EBONY & JET; **Constance Hill-Johnson**, Cleveland Foundation Board Chairperson; **Kevin McDaniel**, AAPC member; **Justin Horton**, AAPC member; **Terri Eason**, Cleveland Foundation Senior Director of Advancement Equity Initiatives; **Robyn Minter Smyers**, AAPC member; **Belva Denmark Tibbs**, AAPC member; **Jazmin Long**, AAPC member; and **Kevin Clayton**, senior vice president, head of social impact and equity for the Cleveland Cavaliers.



In 1993, former Cleveland Foundation president & CEO Steven A. Minter founded the African American Outreach Advisory Committee to magnify and unite the collective impact of Black donors connected to the Cleveland Foundation. “His major goal was to create this group of like-minded individuals who would be focused on coming up with strategies about how to give back to the Black community,” said Terri Eason, the foundation’s senior director of advancement equity initiatives.

What started as a “lunch bunch” of donors became a formal group that was supported by the Cleveland Foundation unilaterally. Today, the group provides leadership on critical issues regarding the current and future state of giving in the Black community.

In 2001, the name changed to the **African American Philanthropy Committee (AAPC)**. Eason shares that “[they] put together a strategic plan that focused specifically on engaging, informing and educating individual donors so that they can understand how philanthropy can help with building community, wealth preservation, and the like.”

GROWING COMMUNITY

Community is an integral part of the AAPC. Members often become life-long friends, colleagues and collaborators, expanding their ranks to other like-minded Clevelanders.

“We also wanted to make sure that we knew one another because we are a community of folks here in Northeast Ohio,” said AAPC co-chair **Ronald V. Johnson Jr., Esq.**, KeyBank chief ethics officer. “And so, we wanted to make sure that we provided the right environment to promote Black philanthropy.”

One of the many people that Eason invited to join in the early 2000s was the owner and managing director of Visiting Angels Living Assistance Services, **Connie Hill-Johnson**, currently chair of the Cleveland Foundation Board of Directors and the first African American woman to hold the post. Joining the AAPC in 2009 was her initial involvement with the foundation. She said knowing it was an initiative started by Steve Minter was a motivating factor to join.

“I jumped in feet first with the African American Philanthropy Committee,” Hill-Johnson said. “It just sat well in my spirit that this is where I wanted to give my extra time outside of my business.”

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Ellen Burts-Cooper, Ph.D.

The group is intentional about making sure they are measuring progress, said Eason, from efforts to build community to always asking what more they can do. As a result, their impact now extends beyond Cleveland — the AAPC and its biennial African American Philanthropy Summit are now national models for engagement, and people from around the country attend the summit.

LEADING THE NEXT GENERATION OF GIVERS

“Whether [the title of philanthropist is] self-proclaimed or given, if you give to others and put them in a better position than they were before by having had an interaction with you, that’s philanthropy,” said AAPC co-chair **Ellen Burts-Cooper, Ph.D.**, chief improvement officer of Improve Consulting & Training Group.

The AAPC is also striving to build onramps for other Black philanthropists. In 2022, the summit theme was “Philanthropic Equity: Making an Impact.”

“We’re in a social reckoning, and the discussions centered on ‘How do we think about philanthropy from more of an equitable perspective?’ ‘How do we get more equity and diversity in making decisions about grants, investing resources,

and being more thoughtful and strategic in supporting organizations that are providing services to the community?’” Johnson said.

For Burts-Cooper, “The greatest joy has been watching the faces of the people who benefit from our work. It’s also been watching the faces of people who are educated on different vehicles and different avenues to give to others.”

For those interested in giving, “the important thing is to do that self-reflection and to think about what moves us,” Johnson said. “It can start with one volunteer act or a small financial donation. It’s really about building a relationship with the cause and an organization. Once you start nurturing and building those relationships, it’s amazing what we can do.”

LEGACY CONTINUED

When Steve Minter first entered the field of philanthropy, he was one of few African Americans. During The Soul of Philanthropy Cleveland (TSOPCLE) exhibit at the Western Reserve Historical Society in 2019, an immense amount of change was recognized regarding decision making and equity in the field.

Hill-Johnson remembers the event fondly. After being recognized for his contributions, she recalls Steve pausing in front of the

audience to take in the moment. African American people are often characterized on the receiving side of philanthropy, Hill-Johnson said. Yet, during this exhibition, there was a celebration of “Those Who Give Black.”

“It was as if he was reflecting on his many, many years of work and service and where he wanted to get to,” Hill-Johnson said. “We achieved what he wanted to see. And then shortly after that, he passed away.”

THE FUTURE

“I am so excited and hopeful about our move to MidTown. I have to be one of the biggest cheerleaders for what our board decided several years ago,” Hill-Johnson said. Within the new Cleveland Foundation headquarters, the AAPC Conference Room of the Steven A. Minter Conference Center will be free for community members who want to use the space. Thus, additional groups might connect, collaborate and launch initiatives that extend far into the future.



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