



IT ALL STARTS AT HOME

Townsend provides leadership for neighborhood improvement

STORY BY KEN DE LA BASTIDE
PHOTOS BY RICHARD SITLER

During the course of the past five decades, Kim Townsend has seen dramatic changes in the local Black community. She also sees much work to be done. As the executive director of the Anderson Housing Authority, Townsend has the goal of providing quality affordable housing to families in the low-to-moderate income range.

She was born in 1968 and lived on Dewey Street until her father, Bill Raymore, secured a job in the administration of former Anderson Mayor Robert Rock. At the age of 4, the family moved to Park Place, and she attended an integrated school.

"It became a mix of experiences," Townsend recalls. "I was the only Black child in my class, and when they taught about slavery, everyone was looking at me."

When the local General Motors plants were hiring, Townsend remembers, homes on the city's west side reflected pride of ownership and a sense of community.

As the factories closed and the jobs disappeared, residents could not afford to maintain those homes.

"I was told in the eighth grade by my teacher to go

to college, because you will not work at GM," Townsend says. "That was years before they started pulling out."

Growing up, Townsend experienced discrimination in Anderson but had an eye-opening experience while attending college in Tennessee.

"Today discrimination is more covert; when I was growing up it was overt in the community," she recalls. "I remember my dad working to integrate Highland High School when the (Ku Klux) Klan demonstrated."

Steps toward directing resources to Black neighborhoods have often gone nowhere, Townsend says, noting that in the spring of 2018 a neighborhood revitalization project called Sweet 16 (a play on the area's 46016 ZIP code) was launched to improve quality of life in Anderson's near west side. Partners in the project included the natural gas company Vectren.

"The project never took off, but some of it was related to COVID-19," Townsend acknowledges. "I was never sure about that because we didn't know what Vectren was willing to invest. We needed financial resources."



Strides in racial relations have been made recently, Townsend says, noting the city of Elwood's recognition of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday several years ago.

"We need to continue to make bigger strides," she says, citing examples during the administration of Mark Lawler, Anderson's mayor for four terms beginning in the 1990s. During that stretch, a crime watch was started and target zones for upgrading entire streets were established.

Currently, better code enforcement is needed in Anderson, Townsend says, to improve property values and neighborhood pride.

"There is a need for a vision and a plan, a way to keep things moving," she explains. "Four years from now, I hope there is more collaboration among agencies. There needs to be money invested to jump-start new businesses in the area and to sustain those that have located here."

Some Anderson neighborhoods continue to deal with high poverty and low educational attainment.

"Housing is tied directly to economic development," Townsend points out. "When companies are looking to locate in Anderson, they look to see if there is available, affordable housing. We don't have a highly skilled and highly educated workforce. We need good housing and schools."

As director of the local public housing agency,

Townsend has set goals, such as completing the Lincolnshire Apartment project and bringing more affordable housing to the area.

"I want to work with people who can help fulfill those goals," she notes. "Right now, I'm participating in a lot of community discussions; people are looking to me for leadership."

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Thomas Newman Jr., a board member with the Housing Authority, says Townsend is the right person to lead.

"She has been such an angel for so many areas of Madison County," he says. "Everybody is realizing what community and public service can be when they use her as a role model. She has been a great inspiration for so many people."

Housing Authority board member Terry Taylor calls Townsend's leadership "amazing," citing "involvement in the local community and her involvement nationwide by bringing new ideas to Anderson." •

ANDERSON HOUSING AUTHORITY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR KIM TOWNSEND (SITTING AT HEAD OF TABLE), IS SHOWN WITH DIVERSE MEMBERS OF HER TEAM AT THE AGENCY. LEFT TO RIGHT ARE ANTHONY L. JORDAN, MARY RANDOL, KIM TOWNSEND, WENDY KING AND MELISSA PEREZ.