

## Chris Rickert: In wake of Tony Robinson tragedy, Michael Johnson walks the walk



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It's common after traumatic community events for people to say the healing process requires everyone to come together and for every voice to be heard.

Madison and plenty of other liberal enclaves like to pull out the Kumbaya card.

But you've got to be a little touched in the head — or maybe touched by some higher power (if you believe in one) — to actually play it.

Less than a week after a 19-year-old unarmed, black man named Tony Robinson was shot and killed by a Madison police officer, Boys & Girls Club of Dane County CEO Michael Johnson entered the office of what might be the most reviled figure in Madison — Republican Gov. Scott Walker — to ask him to reach out to Robinson's family and offer suggestions for improving the lot of Wisconsin's black community.

Only hours after the shooting, Johnson arranged to have Madison Police Chief Mike Koval meet with the family to offer his condolences, absorb their anger and, ultimately, join them in prayer.

Those were two pretty risky — some might even say misguided — moves.

The chances are probably close to nil that all-but-declared presidential candidate Walker will adopt any of Johnson's suggestions, such as creating youth internships and a jobs program for black men, and expanding the Madison School District's AVID/TOPS college-readiness program. Worse, for the people who are unsure about the governor, Johnson's visit confers a legitimacy that maybe Walker doesn't deserve.

And for Johnson, a black man, to make nice with the white police chief so soon after one of his officers kills a man of color runs the risk of raising questions in the black community about his loyalties. It could also turn out — although there is no evidence of it to date — that the officer was motivated by racial animus and the police force is as systemically racist as some of Madison's protesters allege.

Johnson told me he follows his gut and is motivated by doing what's right for children. As for the Walker visit, "I wanted all levels of government connected to this family," he said.

Some people didn't think he should meet with the governor or be as transparent about it as he was, he said. Others have questioned his decisions to publicly support Koval, reach out

to the Robinson family and be outspoken on community issues in general.

“It’s not comfortable,” he told me, noting that the Boys & Girls Club has donors he’s got to think about. “I’m getting hit from every angle you can think of.”

Johnson friend and Boys & Girls Club supporter Tim Metcalfe described Johnson as “selfless” and “one of the most unique individuals” he’s ever met, pointing to the club’s expanding role in the community and successful fundraising efforts. For Johnson, it’s “about the kids,” he said, and “any of this other stuff to him is white noise.”

It’s easy to be cynical about Johnson’s hopeful, apolitical, all-inclusive style, but maybe that’s because so few of us — myself included — are capable of adopting it.

“Some people would call it naive,” Johnson said, “but if you look at my track record, we get things done.”

By contrast, what good have cynicism, hopelessness and politics done lately?

## Chris Rickert



Chris Rickert is the metro columnist for the Wisconsin State Journal, where he's got his laser-like perspective trained (mostly) on all things Madison. He is especially engaged by blatant hypocrisy, hot partisan rhetoric, class warfare and ice cream.

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