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## In their own words: Madison community leaders reflect on 2017, look ahead to 2018

By Lisa Speckhard Pasque Dec 25, 2017



Mai Zong Vue

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Madison residents face plenty of struggles — from the city's well-documented racial disparities to lack of affordable housing — but there's also no shortage of efforts to change the status quo. Here's a look at what some community leaders accomplished in 2017. They talk about the challenges they faced and explain how the national political climate weighed many of them down. All are already looking forward to 2018 with a new set of goals.

**Sabrina “Heymiss Progress” Madison, social entrepreneur, motivational speaker, founder of the The Progress Center for Black Women**

### **What was a significant achievement for you in 2017?**

Launching The Progress Center for Black Women was one of the most significant achievements, as it brings together my leadership and entrepreneurial work.



Sabrina Madison

### **What challenges did you face in 2017?**

The greatest has been not being able to meet the demand of so many single Black mothers who are experiencing financial emergencies. From evictions to not being able to provide meals for their children — the need is overwhelming. The hardest part of the day can be hearing the defeat in a mother's voice. That's hard, really hard.

### **Did the national political scene affect your work in 2017? If yes, how so?**

Of course, it increased even more so the sense of urgency to build and collaborate with like minded people and organizations to benefit Black women. Black women have carried tremendous burdens. The election of Donald Trump to the highest office in the United States was not only a blow to our families, it was essentially a kick to the backs of Black women. It was a reminder that often, we (read Black women) are very much alone in our fight to restore ourselves and our families.

### **Looking ahead to the next year, what challenges do you expect? What would you like to accomplish?**

I expect that the financial emergencies faced by Black mothers will continue to increase and we'll see more Black women running for office because they too have faced such emergencies. My accomplishments belong to the women, men and families who benefit from my work. I want them to start businesses, get promotions, to be able to pay their rent and buy food. I want to be part of their progress, essentially. If they make it, I have accomplished my part.

Follow Black women. We urgently need your investments, support, commitments, trust and more.

### **Michael Johnson, President and CEO of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County**

#### **What was a significant achievement for you in 2017?**

All 167 of my kids from the AVID/TOPS/College Club program graduated from high school and are in college this semester. I'm very, very proud of that. I'm very proud of the work we did providing aid for hurricane victims in Texas, Georgia and Florida. This has been our most productive year at the Boys and Girls Club.

#### **What challenges did you face in 2017?**

There were two very public battles we had to endure: fighting for funding for the 15-point violence prevention plan and speaking out against the mayor of Fitchburg's decision to zero-out funding for nonprofits in his budget.

At the end of the day, we won those battles. We convinced the Fitchburg City Council to overturn the mayor's decision, and now five local nonprofits will benefit from our advocacy efforts. We also helped convince the Madison City Council to unanimously approve \$400,000 in funding to address violence prevention strategies in the city.

We lost some supporters, but I would say when I look at the grand scheme of things, we have gained more support this year than we ever have in the history of this organization.

**Did the national political scene affect your work in 2017? If yes, how so?**

I try, for the most part, to stay away from the religious and political conversations, and focus directly on kids. If there's a specific policy that's out there that might hurt young people, I'll address that.

**Looking ahead to the next year, what challenges do you expect? What would you like to accomplish?**

In January, we're opening a new dental clinic in Allied Drive with More Smiles Wisconsin. This clinic will have a full-time paid dentist serving thousands of children and families in Dane County. I'm also excited to expand the number of kids we serve and run programs in public schools.

**Veronica Figueroa-Velez, executive director of UNIDOS Against Domestic Violence, a Madison nonprofit organization serving victims of sexual assault, domestic violence and human trafficking**



Sina Davis spoke very briefly after being recognized by Boys and Girls Club of Dane County CEO Michael Johnson, background, during the Sina Davis Community Thanksgiving Dinner at the Boys and Girls Club in the Allied Drive neighborhood in Fitchburg, Wis., Tuesday, Nov. 21, 2017. "I love me some Allied Drive," she said. The annual dinner, in its seventh year, is in its first year named for the community leader, volunteer and friend of the club. M.P. KING, STATE JOURNAL

M.P. KING

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Veronica Lazo, executive director, UNIDOS Against Domestic Violence speaks during a Centro Hispano event.

PHOTO BY SAIYNA BASHIR

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### **What was a significant achievement for you in 2017?**

UNIDOS started a 24/7 hotline in Spanish on Jan. 1, 2017, and it has been amazing for us.

### **What challenges did you face in 2017?**

The Trump administration is a challenge. Many UNIDOS clients are undocumented, and UNIDOS used to actively encourage victims to file for a form of immigration relief. Now, victims are afraid to apply for the relief, because they don't want to let the government know they're undocumented. Victims are also putting off calling the police to report crimes, and instead coming to UNIDOS. They don't feel safe calling the police on their own.

Another huge challenge has been trying to find affordable housing (or housing at all) for victims of domestic violence. Victims who are undocumented go through a tremendous amount of stress to find safety, and sometimes they think it's not worth it to even leave.

### **Looking ahead to the next year, what challenges do you expect? What would you like to accomplish?**

If the country continues on its current trend of detrimental policies towards victims and protected groups, I'm worried about eventually losing our funding from the federal government. No one at UNIDOS is a fundraising expert, but our current funding stretches through 2019, so in 2018 we will begin to find strategies to get our big

dollars from donors. If you'd like to support the work of UNIDOS, visit [www.unidoswi.org](http://www.unidoswi.org).

## **Karen Menendez Coller, executive director of Centro Hispano**

### **What was a significant achievement for you in 2017?**

I'm incredibly proud of all the work we did at Centro in 2017, every single thing was an achievement. We remained committed to our mission of supporting youth (100 percent of our high school kids graduated with a plan for college), providing wrap-around support for adults (we hired our first general support case manager in Sun Prairie and our employment training programs continue to have an 80 percent retention rate among hires) and engagement of community (our mercadito became a weekly summer event).

We did all this while supporting countywide collaborations promoting better legal supports for families, emergency preparedness in the case of crisis, and a process for sanctuary of immigrants.

We were also able to complete a massive redesign of our organization in October, leaving us with a building that is a step closer to meeting the needs of our programming.

### **What challenges did you face in 2017? Did the national political scene affect your work?**

Policies were supported at the federal level that were in direct opposition to what we stand for. This was incredibly challenging on both a professional and personal level. My strength came from hearing from the youth we serve at Centro and the adults who said, "We are ready and not backing down." If they believe, I know we can too.

### **Looking ahead to the next year, what challenges do you expect? What would you like to accomplish?**

Some of the same challenges remain: the climate and policies against immigrants and refugees are immoral and loom heavy in the lives of our families.

However we are now prepared and organized to be better able to tackle obstacles. Next year we will continue to ask the general community to engage with Centro and the Latino community. We will double-down on the support we want to provide our youth, especially our DREAMERS, including growing the scholarship endowment we began in 2016.

I hope 2018 brings deeper dialogue around diversity and equity in Madison across race. I hope it brings a lot more humility for this city, a lot more respect for the neighborhoods, and a greater desire for innovation and pushing the bar in terms of the work we do.

## Kaleem Caire, founder and president of One City Early Learning Centers



Kaleem Caire, founder and CEO of Achieve64 and One City Early Learning Centers speaks at the Madison Public Library during Cap Times Talk. "I am the product of 10,000 hands," he said.

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### **What was a significant achievement for you in 2017?**

We sent 89 percent of our children into kindergarten academically ready to succeed. They're all doing well in kindergarten right now too. We also just submitted your application to the University of Wisconsin System so we can become a charter school.

### **What challenges did you face in 2017? Did the national political scene affect your work?**

One of them has just been the general mood of the country: people seem really anxious. It's been hard to keep people's attention around things that matter. We really want to ensure that early education becomes a major priority of our community, but there's so many challenges we're confronting right now that's it's hard to get people to focus on that particular issue.

Our families are going through a lot. Some of our families are stable, and other families are living paycheck to paycheck, they're struggling to keep their jobs and they don't have adequate transportation. For all centers that serve a significant numbers of families with limited income, it's tough. We live that experience with our families.

### **Looking ahead to the next year, what challenges do you expect? What would you like to accomplish?**

We're looking to offer kindergarten next year through this charter. That could bring our enrollment from 50 to 110 kids by this fall. We'll hear about the status of our charter application in February.

We also want to buy our building, and we're working on a strategic plan to introduce two more One City locations, likely both in Madison. We're also planning an event for October of next year, a major concert, awards show and rally around education from preschool to grade 12 next year, to raise money to support kids. We should have details about that in January or February of next year.

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Lisa Speckhard