
TAKING THE LEAD

Melodee Colbert-Kean To Serve As President of the National League of Cities



Melodee Colbert-Kean
Councilmember, City of Joplin
First Vice President, National League of Cities

In November 2015, Joplin Councilmember Melodee Colbert-Kean will begin her one-year term as President of the National League of Cities (NLC). Colbert-Kean is the first Missouri city official to be named to this top leadership position with NLC in more than 50 years. In her role, she will have the opportunity to represent Missouri while meeting with national leaders in Congress and abroad. In this issue of the MML Review, Colbert-Kean shares her background, inspiration for local government, and highlights her priorities as she takes on a top leadership role in local government.

PLEASE TELL US ABOUT YOUR FAMILY AND YOUR BACKGROUND.

I am a lifelong resident of Joplin, where I attended Joplin schools and graduated from Missouri Southern State University with a marketing degree. I am married to William Kean and we have four children: Tyler, Typhanee, Amber and Alissa. We are active members of Unity Baptist Church.

WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO IN YOUR FREE TIME?

What “free” time? I love music! It is my favorite way to escape, along with completing jigsaw puzzles (at least 1000 pieces) and reading books and hanging with family and friends.

WHO ARE YOUR ROLE MODELS?

My dad was my best example of the person I wanted to emulate. He was the most loving and caring man, and would help anyone who asked or was in need. He didn’t know a stranger, and was kind to all. I also had a favorite high school teacher who made sure that I knew I could be whatever I wanted. Marilyn Dishman instilled confidence in my leadership abilities, when I didn’t know I had those abilities, and she uncovered a part of me that wanted to be something in life!

Growing up, I really don’t remember ever saying I wanted to be president, much less a mayor, or any of those

careers you hear kids say today. Our role models were hourly working moms and dads, aunts and uncles and teachers who were also family friends. Nothing lacked in these portrayals, and we were happy as could be as long as we could walk and play with our large group of friends; we just were not heavily exposed to top leadership roles.

HOW DOES MISSOURI BENEFIT FROM A MISSOURI LOCAL OFFICIAL SERVING IN THIS TOP ROLE?

Serving as NLC president will bring awareness of Missouri on a national level. This position is able to interact directly with the representatives and key administration officials concerning the needs of cities. We have a major opportunity to showcase our state in a positive light by highlighting some of the great works each city has been doing.

WHAT IS YOUR BACKGROUND AS AN ELECTED OFFICIAL?

I became involved with city government in 2005 when there were a number of seats coming open in 2006, and a small group of black residents had a meeting to see if anyone wanted to run to have council representation. I was the lone volunteer aside from Jim West, who had previously been on the council and was running again. With community support, I ran against an incumbent and have been on the Council since 2006 to present. My council peers elected me to Vice Mayor in 2010-2012, and to Mayor in 2012.

I have also had the opportunity to serve with state and national level organizations, such as the Missouri Municipal League (MML) as chair of a policy committee and the National League of Cities, serving or chairing committees. I am honored to take a lead role with NLC as president in November 2015.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER A NEW LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL?

Now that I have been in this position for more than nine years, I have learned that it is a major time commitment. Your family and everyone has to have buy-in or it won't work! It is vital to have your support team in place to balance out the required load.

Also, if you want to become involved in public service, don't always take it personal! There are going to be people that will criticize everything you do and every decision you make, good, bad or otherwise. Understand that you can't please everybody, so don't try. Make the most informed decisions you can based on the most relevant and fact-based information you can obtain, and be at peace with your decisions. Stay positive and continue to do your best.

WHAT IS YOUR PROUDEST ACCOMPLISHMENT?

My proudest accomplishment is raising my children. Starting out as a single mother with my oldest two was a challenge, but with Gods help and the support of my family and friends, we made it through fears, tears, smiles, frowns, ups, downs, sports, various activities, honor societies, trips, jobs and graduations. I am so proud of the young adults that our children have become, and it gives me a warm fuzzy to actually be friends with them, as well as parents, as they continue to develop into adulthood.

WHAT IS YOUR BEST VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE?

Whenever I can spend time helping someone, it gives me a great feeling. It may be something small such as donating clothing or toys, or as involved as donating my time or money, but giving has never hurt me as much as it has helped someone else!

While Mayor, I was proud to speak at the Crosslines Ministry anniversary and share remarks about when I was a recipient of their wonderful, worthwhile services. I am not ashamed of circumstances from which the Lord has brought me; it lets others know they can accomplish the same thing and more.

IN MAY 2011, A CATASTROPHIC TORNADO STRUCK YOUR CITY. HOW DID THE DEVASTATION AFFECT YOUR FAMILY?

While my family wasn't directly impacted by the tornado of 2011, we were, as well as the rest of the city, affected by the devastation. When you have one-third of your city leveled, creating never-imagined mountains and miles of debris, you can't help but feel the major impact. When you travel through desolated areas that were once vibrant streets and homes to so many, or inch your way along a road that suddenly has you traveling through someone's yard, because the road has disappeared into chunks of concrete, trees, autos and debris, you are affected. When you hear



Colbert-Kean participated in honoring Pastor Harry Givens as a Montford Point Marine, the first African Americans to serve in the U.S. Marine Corp. Givens served as a Corporal in the Pacific Theater during World War II, from 1944-1946.

NLC BY THE NUMBERS

10...

State municipal leagues founded the American Municipal Association (later named the National League of Cities) in 1924 upon seeing a need for a national organization to strengthen local government.

19,000...

Cities and towns represented through the state municipal league network. NLC represents more than 218 million Americans.

55...

Years since Missouri has been represented in NLC Leadership as President. Missouri has had two other mayors who served in this role: Mayor Raymond R. Tucker, St. Louis, served as president in 1960 and Mayor W.F. Kemp, Kansas City, was president in 1954.



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HOW DOES A MEMBER GET INVOLVED IN NLC LEADERSHIP?

As an elected official, you have to first want to take part in the many different leadership development opportunities offered to elected government officials. Cities pay a membership fee based on their population, and council members can choose to become involved to develop their leadership skills. While attending the conferences and leadership seminars, officials are encouraged by peers, staff and leadership to become more deeply involved in the organization; officials can help shape policy, provide meaningful input and be an overall advocate for all of America's cities and towns.

NLC gives you an opportunity to get directly involved in helping to shape communities by placing you in direct contact with key administrative officials and congressional representatives through conferences and leadership seminars.

WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS AS PRESIDENT OF NLC OVER THE COMING YEAR?

I plan to continue focusing on NLC's top three challenges for cities; crumbling infrastructure, e-fairness/marketplace fairness and continuing tax-exempt municipal bonds.

I also want to expand partnerships, small business growth and job creation in cities. Many cities are taking the lead on shaping growth with creative partnerships. These help to keep a city's infrastructure, recreational needs and employment base strong. I also want to increase youth mentorship programs and provide avenues for youth to succeed in our communities. Once we are in a position to lead, it is each of our duties to help someone else along their journey.

DO YOU HAVE A KEY MESSAGE OR PLATFORM FOR THIS TERM?

Encouragement, relationship building, developing partnerships and positive collaboration are all necessary tools to open doors to growth and development to better our citizens, thus bettering our cities.

Leaders will work together towards the goals of cities and being bold when it comes to getting key city messages to Congress. Once the goal of an organization is achieving the vision and not focusing on who gets the credit, there is greater success for the whole organization. □

Join Melodee, MML members and local government leaders from around the nation at the NLC Congress of Cities, Nov. 4-7, 2015, in Nashville, Tennessee. A celebration of her role as president is planned for Nov. 6. Learn more at www.mocities.com.

about the bravery and selflessness of so many who sacrificed their lives to save others; the countless numbers who came to provide aid to our city, and those who are still coming; or just the way the city came together in our time of need, you will always be affected.

HOW HAS THE TORNADO CHANGED THE CITY OF JOPLIN?

As a community, we are more focused on what matters in redeveloping our city and helping to grow it into a community shaped by citizen's needs and visions. We are more attuned to implementing safety aspects in construction, increasing economic growth and enhancing educational opportunities, as well as developing recreational and entertainment avenues for residents.



Colbert-Kean waves to watchers along the route of Joplin's Walk of Unity, that took place on the one-year anniversary of the Joplin Tornado.