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## Kent Black Action Commission: Standing Up For What's Right

By Chris B. Bennett  
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Whether they know it or not, many residents in the city of Kent are the beneficiaries of a grassroots organization that has quickly become a powerful group of people who are unapologetic when it comes to standing up, speaking out and promoting what is in the best interest of Black folks in South King County.

Founded in 2011, the Kent Black Action Commission, affectionately known as KBAC, is unwavering in their mission to improve and promote the social, political, economic, spiritual and educational conditions of Kent, Washington and the South King County Region.

The group, which initially started meeting in the garage of a founding member, does not waste time talking about problems until they are blue in the face and come away without solutions or a plan of action, but rather they meet with a purpose of deciding the best mode of action to take in order to address issues swiftly and effectively. Sometimes the action is quiet and subtle, and other times they are vocal and demanding. Either way, the proposed action is well thought out, planned and executed.

"We don't just come together to just sit together and have a meeting," said KBAC Executive Director Gwen Allen-Carston. "We are a group of people who are continually taking action. We continually want to make sure that we're doing things that help and serve our community."

As an increasing number of incidents began to take place in Kent, it became more and more apparent that African Americans living in the area needed a voice and an advocate. However, historic civil rights organizations and community activists in Seattle didn't have much of a footprint in Kent, and basically left the residents of the state's sixth largest city to fight their own battles.

"In the beginning, it was a bunch of people who were taking a look at our surroundings out here in Kent and seeing what was going on as far as our representation as a community, specifically, an African American/Black community and we felt that things were either not working in our favor or we needed to do more to help our own issues," says Allen-Carston.

Alex Jones, a member of KBAC, has seen first hand the difficulties African Americans have had to endure in Kent since he moved to the city 45 years ago. Jones has been fighting for justice and equality ever since.

"I was the first Black that the City of Kent hired. I had to go before the [city] council to be confirmed like you do in Washington D.C. and I thought that was unheard of just to mow grass," says Jones. "I've fought these people since 1970 until KBAC came in. I'm glad KBAC is here because I'm tired. But I'm going to keep fighting with Gwen and this group."

One of KBAC's first major victories came when Allen-Carston attempted to go into the McDonald's on 256<sup>th</sup> in Kent across the street from Kent-Meridian High School. Allen-Carston was trying to go inside the restaurant only to find the door locked.

"I drive up to the McDonald's one day and the sign said we are closed until 4," recalled Allen-Carston.

The staff informed her that they



Members of the Kent Black Action Commission. Pictured clockwise from the top: Willie Wright, Charles Carston, Gwen Allen-Carston, Azalea Johnson, Richard Johnson, Linda Sweezer, Charmaine Boston, and Alex Jones. *Staff Photo/Chris B. Bennett.*

were instructed to lock the doors between 2:00 and 4:00 p.m. because they could not control the kids who came in the restaurant after getting out of school.

"I refuse to be treated like a 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizen when it comes to our children and the people in the community being locked out because your corporation doesn't have a clue about how to handle security," says Allen-Carston. "You're not only locking the doors on the young people, you're locking the doors on the customers. I'm a customer!"

According to Allen-Carston, working on behalf of KBAC she got an audience with McDonald's district director to address the issue. After that meeting, McDonald's from a corporate level "expressly told them" to not lock the doors again.

For KBAC, it was a moment that provided them with the confidence that they could indeed address issues alone or in tandem with other organizations.

"I think that was the thing that said we can handle this, we don't have to wait for the NAACP, we don't have to wait for the Urban League, so somebody had to do something and I said why not me," says Allen-Carston. "If there's a wrong, you attack the wrong and you do what's necessary to make the wrong right. That's how I feel and I ain't scared of none of them. I am not afraid."

"I think that's what KBAC stands for," says KBAC member Charmaine

Boston. "We're not afraid to fight the fight."

Originally from Texas, Boston lived in Seattle for 25 years before relocating to Kent. Since joining the organization, KBAC has been the centerpiece of Boston's renewed focus on bettering her community, activism and advocacy. Her first encounter with KBAC was when she attended their Juneteenth celebration and she has been a member ever since.

"I felt Seattle was becoming disconnected," said Boston. "We lost CAMP and a lot of things that we had to depend on we didn't have anymore, so I moved to Kent."

"Since I've been in Kent, KBAC has been a big support to me," continued Boston. "[KBAC] helped me start [my catering business], and has helped me establish myself as a worthy person. We want people to know and understand what's going on out here. We're not just about giving picnics and parties all the time, we do things in Kent, we really do and we're a force to be reckoned with."

To date, the most significant action KBAC has taken was when they took long-time Kent City Councilmember Les Thomas to task for refusing to honor a moment of silence during a council meeting for Michael Brown after he was gunned down by a Ferguson, Missouri police officer. In addition, Thomas referred to Brown as an "18-year-old thief" in defense of his not recognizing the moment of silence.

In response to Thomas' public statements about Brown, KBAC organized a rally at the Regional Justice Center in Kent and then marched to City Hall where the City Council was holding their regularly scheduled full council meeting. During the public comment period of the council meeting, where citizens are given three minutes to provide public comment to the council, members of KBAC, one by one, read portions of their statement in its entirety about race relations, their response to Thomas' comments and ultimately demanded a public apology from Thomas and his resignation from the council.

"We not only expressed our consternation for him [Thomas] making those statements, but we educated the city council about slavery, the Black codes, Jim Crow, etc.," said KBAC member Richard Johnson. "We got pushback from one person in the newspaper and we went right back at that and all of a sudden all we heard were crickets."

For Allen-Carston, the message to Thomas, the city council and the city of Kent as a whole was very clear.

"We don't care who you are Les Thomas," said Allen-Carston. "We're not going to stand by and watch you just demean us in any kind of way you think is ok and by that we need a public apology and we're calling for your resignation. We made our statement in opposition to him being [insensitive],

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