

An Evolving Platform, Rooted in Presence

BY MICAH ROSE EMERSON



When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a psychologist who also was president of the United States. My parents didn't discourage me. We had a family debate before every election . . . even the local ones. These were the highlight of my childhood. I'm pretty sure that my sister (who is four years younger than I) wanted Mickey Mouse to be president, but I was convinced that Ross Perot was the right guy. I don't know how my parents sat there with straight faces. We were passionate and that was the point. We cared.

As a young adult, I began to look at politics as more than just something to debate with my friends. I began to see it as a way to change the world. I focused on learning a lot about the systems that were created by the founding fathers of this country. Even as I was learning, I could sense that there was more that I could be doing. Around this same time, I was introduced to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I had just moved to New York and become a nanny. The family I worked for invited me to a service at Gilead Presbyterian Church (Carmel, New York). I attended one service and was hooked. I loved so much about the church. I was immediately greeted by fresh coffee, pastries and the folks who stood at the front door. This little church became home.

It was at Gilead that I learned about opportunities in the larger church. I jumped at the prospect of being part of Racial Ethnic Young Women Together (REYWT), a group supported by Presbyterian Women (PW) and the PC(USA)'s Women Ministries. It was also in this space that I started dreaming about being involved in politics that could change the world.

In the years that followed, I attended several General Assemblies and my first protests, which called for equal rights for LGBTQ2IA folk* who were called to ministry. I also left New York to become a missionary with a Christian organization called Mission Year and stayed connected to PW and the PC(USA). I advocated for young women of color with REYWT and learned how to be a good neighbor in Atlanta. I found myself in conversations and spaces with people who thought differently than I did, but who believed, as I did, in the need for justice, equity and inclusion.

I moved back to my hometown of Kansas City, and was reminded of all the issues that affect marginalized peoples. I read books, listened to podcasts, attended lectures, voted and tried my hardest to facilitate change. I worked for local nonprofits. Still, something was missing: my voice.

My advocacy at the time was rooted in acquiring knowledge, but I had missed a giant piece of the puzzle. Presence, participation and proximity are how we shift things, along with prayer and community. I felt called to

be a part of something that would have great impact. I felt called to use my voice to change the world.

Presence

I looked for nonprofits doing meaningful work in the lives of children and chose to work for the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Kansas City. I was a teen group leader for a bit, then transitioned to coordinating a literacy program for children in kindergarten to third grade. At the same time, I started to help care for my five-year-old niece. I also moved to a neighborhood that was closer to work. Then I did the most surprising thing: I became a foster parent.

Initially, I was thinking that I would be a foster parent to save children. I wanted to adopt them and give them good homes . . . until I got my first placement. I was introduced to my former foster son's mom while she was pregnant with him. After a long, hard conversation, she asked me if I would care for him. I said yes because, honestly, I can't imagine saying no to a mom who needed time to get her life under control. In two weeks' time, I was caring for a newborn—something that I had never done before. The lesson that I was being taught was that of community and true love.

My church community surrounded me with child care, meals and homework help for my niece, and many listening ears. I had no idea that the seeds of advocacy watered by being a part of REYWT and PW would start to bloom as justice in my heart. I had to fight for this little one's mom like I had never fought for anyone else. I knew that in order to love this baby well, I had to love and honor his mother well. I tried my hardest and, just over a year after he was born, he went home. I

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transitioned pretty seamlessly from Ma to Auntie Micah. This simple act of presence brought two families together that met under the hardest of circumstances and emerged full of grace for each other.

Participation

When asked about getting involved in the community, most people would say voting and volunteering with an organization are great ways. I don't disagree, but there is so much more. This year, a year fraught with the pandemic and racial upheaval, I was asked to join the Kansas City Regional COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund Advisory Board, sponsored by the Greater Kansas City Community Foundation, the United Way of Greater Kansas City, the Local Initiative Support Corporation of Greater Kansas City and the Mid-America Regional Council. This fund was established to focus on needs for health and human services in areas where the needs are greatest. This advisory board is made up of community leaders who oversee and approve grants to various organizations in the Greater Kansas City Metro area.

The very first meeting, I couldn't help but wonder how I got there. “Who am I to be sitting on an advisory board with foundation and organizational leaders?” I thought. Beyond that moment of doubt, I have come to realize that I'm a valuable part of this community. My voice matters.

A few years ago, I applied to the Kansas City chapter of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI). PLTI is a part of a national organization focused on parents and caregivers learning how to become advocates for children in their community. This 21-week participatory experience allowed us to connect with leaders who used their voices to influence various initiatives in their communities. We were required to utilize our new resources to create and execute an initiative in our own community. I decided to partner with a fellow foster parent to shift how foster parents see parents of children in the foster care system.

That experience, coupled with the foundation of advocacy I had from being a part of REYWT, opened the door to my being able to have a voice on the Kansas City COVID-19 Recovery advisory board. This board has made, to date, grants totaling more than \$10 million to over 260 local organizations.

Proximity

I want to be the best advocate for marginalized people. In order to be the best advocate, I have to build relationships. This is the hardest part of making a difference. I need to be near the people whose voices I am elevating. At this very moment, I am sitting on my front porch after having a conversation with some elders in my neighborhood. They are concerned with violence, speeding cars and the loss of community ties to

each other. I stood with them as they told stories of the old neighborhood, who lived where and what they did for a living, as well as who is currently involved in the shenanigans they are very opposed to. I didn't have any solutions to offer. I didn't tell them they were wrong or try to figure out how to fix the ways they feel. I just nodded and tried to hear their hearts. When they decided we were done, I waved and thanked them for taking the time to help me understand their concerns.

Sitting on my porch, I am struck by the fact that there is nothing better than being near to those for whom I am advocating. I am wondering what impact I will make in this community and how I can serve my community. I am thinking through all the people I know and the ways they could champion policies that

improve the lives of the residents in my neighborhood. I am thinking about the people who believe their voices don't need to add to the cacophony of opinions.

It feels overwhelming. It feels impossible, but I take a breath and realize it's okay. Like becoming a foster parent and a board member, my presence and voice will strengthen my community in ways that aren't yet clear. I just need to stay vigilant, to be in community, participate in opportunities to share my voice, and just be present. 🍓

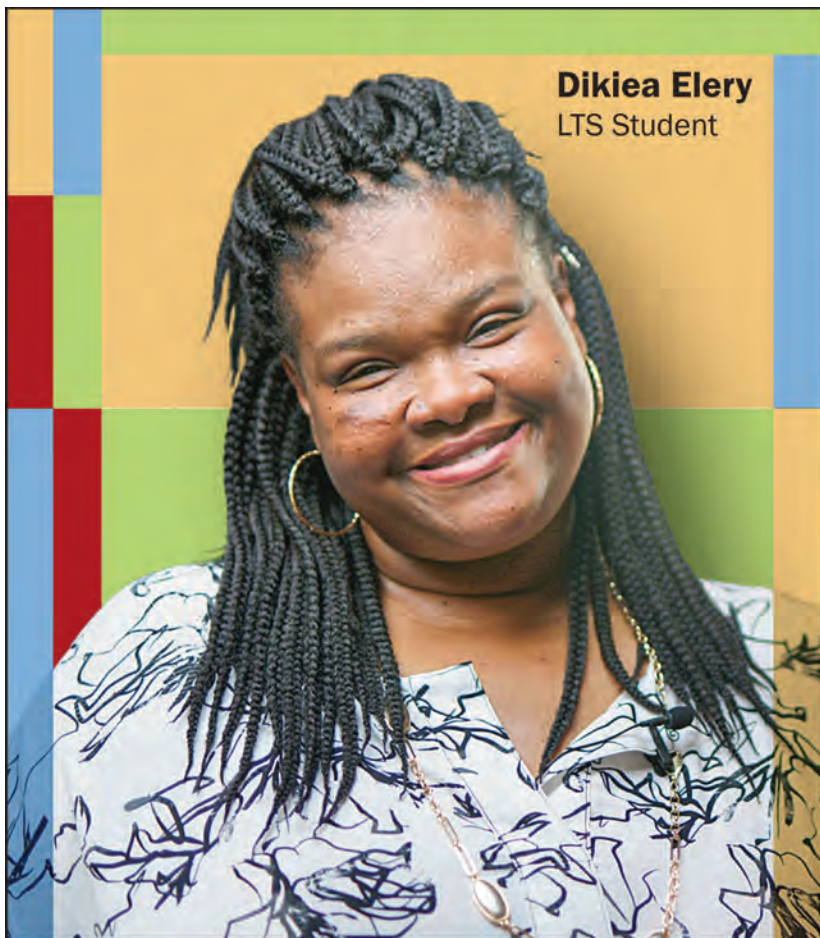
Micah Rose Emerson is a champion of families and community who finds her greatest influences come from deep relationships with those around her.



In 2007, Micah Emerson participated in Presbyterian Women's Global Exchange to Brazil.

Note

* "LGBTQ2IA" stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Two-Spirit, Intersex, Asexual; "folx" includes all other individuals whose gender or sexuality identity is beyond these labels and the gender binary.



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