

greater rochester

**Health** *foundation*

## REFLECTING & REIMAGINING

---

LeKeyah N. Wilson, MD - Health Foundation Board Member  
VP, Community Engagement and Social Impact  
Medical Director of Community Pediatrics and Wellness  
Medical Director of SBHC  
Rochester Regional Health

October 2025

### **Keynote Address: Healthy and Equitable Futures Summit - *Nothing About Us Without Us: Centering Parent Leadership to Build Healthy & Equitable Futures***



#### **Honoring Collective Impact and Family Leadership**

*When I rose up this morning  
I didn't have no doubt  
I knew that the Lord would bring me out  
I fell on my knees  
Said, "lord, help me please"  
Got up singing and shouting victory*

It is a privilege to join you today at the Healthy and Equitable Futures Summit, hosted by the Greater Rochester Health Foundation. This is more than a gathering. It's a celebration of collective impact, of community resilience, and of the transformative power of parent family leadership.

Over several years, we've seen what happens when we lead with families, not for them. When parents and families aren't just invited to the table but are co leading the work, we move from service delivery to systems transformation.

This is the heart of the theme and understanding the assignment.

*"Nothing about us without us."*

This is not a slogan. It's a standard. This statement is both a mirror and a map. It reflects where we've fallen short when systems decide for families and it points to where we must go. It's a call to center lived experience, share power, and design systems with those most impacted at the helm.

---

## My Why

As I stand before you, I want to share my *why*. As you just heard, I have many titles in our community, but the title that I most cherish is momma of Quinn and Natalya and your community pediatrician.

What does it mean to be a community pediatrician current day? The American Academy of Pediatrics defines community pediatrics as the practice of promoting and integrating the positive social, cultural, and environmental influences on children's health as well as addressing potential negative effects that deter optimal child health and development within a community. It is expanding the focus on one child to the well-being of all children in the community. Recognizing that family, educational, social, cultural, spiritual, economic, environmental, and political forces affect the health and functioning of children. It is combining clinical practice and public health principles to promote the health of all children within the context of the family, school, and community. It is a commitment to collaborate with community partners to advocate for and provide quality service equitably for all children. It is authentically engaging with community. Very lengthy definition.

I was a shy product of two teenage parents who were determined not to be a statistic. My father owned his first home at 19 then moved to suburbs for better opportunities for their family. My childhood was happy for the most part but educational journey did not leave a positive imprint.

In kindergarten, I was the only student of color in the entire elementary building until the following year my brother joined me. I was relentlessly teased on the bus because I wore my hair in cornrows. I was called Mumm-Ra from the Thundercat cartoon, a Medusa like character. Daily, I came home with tears in my eyes and begging my mother to style my hair like all the little girls in my class. I was made to feel ugly.

I didn't have a favorite teacher. I don't recall having any meaningful relationships with my teachers. I excelled academically but I did not love learning in these environments. I felt

alone and lesser than. The only time I saw people that looked like me was at church or family gatherings. School was not a safe nurturing environment for me. By the time I graduated from high school, I didn't feel whole. Yes, I was educated, but something was missing.

Attending Howard University was one of the most eye-opening experiences I ever had. To be surrounded by people who looked like me, from everywhere, all walks of life, all together learning and finding ourselves. I literally was living out "a different world." This was the start of me finding my voice that had been silenced.

Fast forward to medical school. Medical school tore me down to the point that I wasn't sure I had what it took. I spent many nights on my knees praying for strength and sleeping with my textbooks. I knew I wanted to be a pediatrician since 5th grade and worked hard to get to medical school. I didn't have the voice or courage to speak up on the injustices I experienced or witnessed on the hospital floors. Fortunately, I had a support system to ensure my success, the other Black medical students.

From medical school to residency and fellowship to being an attending, my voice and confidence were strengthened even though I was frequently tested. I chose to practice medicine where youth were at, from my office, the hospital, the schools and detention centers. Some of the youth I encountered had never seen a Black physician. I was like a unicorn to them. This is when showing up and representing matters the most. If you can see it, you can be it. Wherever these kids were, they were our kids. I provided care and advocacy, which they deserved.

When I received a promotion as Medical Director of Community Pediatrics and Wellness, I explained that I would show up authentically for the community or this wasn't for me. I was excited because it allowed me to be in the community as the liaison between CBOs and the department of pediatrics. Then I got a call from Eldress Jackie Campbell requesting to meet with me. This meeting changed everything. She introduced me to Roc the Future and systems change.

I wasn't completely sold and wasn't sure if I had the power to do anything. Nonetheless, I came to the table. Titles were removed and everyone contributed. Several parents were at the table. They were vocal, dropping knowledge, and unapologetically in charge. I was loving it. I gained tools to go back to my organization to be a change agent. My lens was widened. I saw the community through the eyes of parent family leaders and recognized gaps I hadn't seen before.

At these tables, I felt heard, valued, welcomed not because I am a doctor, but because I am LeKeyah. Our parent and family partners also felt the same way. Because of this, I enhanced the way I practice community pediatrics. I was more aware of resources and asked for feedback to better serve families.

This influences the way I show up now as VP, Community Engagement and Social Impact across our enterprise. Recently, when hiring a new team member, I reviewed job

requirements through a different lens. Were there hiring practices that undermine racial equity? I changed educational and experience requirements that were not necessary. I wanted to foster opportunity for growth and upward mobility. All of this work is my calling. To whom much is given, much will be required.

---

## Highlighting Wins

Let's celebrate what we've built together through five years of listening, growing, and advancing health equity.

The Greater Rochester Health Foundation:

- Set out to listen more deeply, show up more consistently, and become a stronger partner to communities
- Centered voices of those most affected by health inequities
- Pursues and invests in solutions that build a healthier region where all people can thrive

Key highlights include:

- 26 percent of grantees new to the organization
- Increased investment in rural communities
- 300,000 people served
- 42 percent multi-year grants awarded
- 51 percent unrestricted funding granted
- Focus areas including mental and behavioral health, child and youth development, education, community and economic development, and civic engagement

In 2021, Healthy & Equitable Futures launched:

- Focused on racial equity and whole child health for Black and Latinx children ages 0 to 8 in Monroe County
- 50 parent leaders actively involved
- 40 organizational changes reflecting racial equity and community voice

Other wins include parent family leaders shaping maternal health programs across New York State, improving culturally responsive care and birth outcomes.

Community collaborations include:

- PedsRoc4kids bringing together parents, pediatric professionals, educators, and health departments
  - EACH in RCSD expanding telemedicine, school based mental health, and cross discipline collaboration
  - Connecting for Kids improving communication across health and education systems
-

# Why Parent Leadership Matters Across Sectors

Parent and family leadership brings lived experience, cultural insight, and community rooted wisdom into decision making.

## 1. Enhances Equity and Inclusion

- Identifies systemic barriers
- Ensures programs reflect diverse family needs

## 2. Improves Outcomes

- Education gains
- Better health outcomes
- More effective social services

## 3. Builds Trust and Engagement

- Families become partners rather than recipients

## 4. Drives Systems Change

- Advocates for reform
- Encourages transparency and collaboration

## 5. Strengthens Cross Sector Collaboration

- Bridges multiple systems
  - Supports holistic service delivery
- 

# Emerging Trends in Collective Impact

## Equity Centered Design

- Shared power and lived experience
- Parents as co leaders

## Futures Thinking and Co Design

- Long term, community driven solutions

## Compensated Leadership and Capacity Building

- Parent Leadership Training Institute equipping civic leaders
- Training in policy, law, budgeting, and media
- Supports including childcare, meals, and translation

## StriveTogether Collective Impact Network

- National network focused on cradle to career success
- ROC the Future Alliance participation
- Parent partners with equal decision making power

- PECAN Manifesto and compensation models
  - Training and evaluation support
- 

## What Is the Assignment?

Our parent families have said “nothing about us without us.”

The work moves from advisory tables to decision making tables. Parents co design programs, policies, and evaluation metrics. The work demands transparency, accountability, and shared data.

---

## Call to Action: What We Must Do Now

### 1. Reduce Silos

- Establish shared vision and values
- Build trust through transparency
- Create shared governance structures
- Invest in relationships
- Center parent leadership
- Align funding and prioritize racial equity
- Measure community defined outcomes

### 2. Invest in the Work of Parents and Families

- Use the Four Stages of Parent Partnership
- Build authentic relationships
- Compensate parent leaders
- Provide childcare, transportation, and language access
- Standardize parent partner agreements

### 3. Be More Intentional About Racial Equity

Use an equity impact check:

1. Who benefits
2. Who might be burdened
3. What power do families have to alter the design

### 4. Stick to Your Mission

Let your mission guide decisions and actions.

---

# Tailored Strategies for Key Sectors

## Education

- Co design curriculum
- Family advisory councils
- Equity audits
- Cross sector partnerships

## Health Care

- Embed community health workers
- Culturally relevant education
- Trauma informed care
- Community based research

## Philanthropy

- Fund grassroots initiatives
- Participatory grantmaking
- Infrastructure for collaboration

## Policy Makers and Public Agencies

- Parent co leadership
- Integrated services legislation
- Equity impact assessments
- Cross sector data systems

## All Sectors

- Center children and families
- Invest in parent leadership
- Prioritize racial equity
- Collaborate beyond comfort zones
- Stay grounded in mission and values

---

## The Work Ahead

We are at a pivotal moment. The work ahead requires courage, humility, and unwavering commitment. Let us move forward together with parent family leaders at the helm, equity as our guide, and collaboration as our strategy.

During my senior year at Howard, I enrolled in medical school courses and struggled. I dropped a course and lost my scholarship. I wrote daily letters to the provost asking for reinstatement and persisted until he agreed to meet with me. He was impressed with my perseverance and reinstated my scholarship. I graduated Magna Cum laude. I learned the power of my voice.

Our parent family leaders carry that same perseverance and determination. This work can be exhausting, but exhaustion is often a sign that we are giving our all. We may pause to recharge, but we keep showing up.

You never know who is watching you fight for youth and families. Future leaders are watching. We must build our army together.

Your call to action:

Reduce silos  
Put egos and politics aside  
Invest in parent leadership  
Engage community authentically  
Be more intentional about racial equity  
Stick to your mission  
Stand firm on what you believe  
Parents stay true to “nothing about us without us”

This is about the children. Victory will be ours. Even if we do not see it, our children and generations to come will have healthy and equitable futures. This is our charge. This is the legacy we must leave behind.

*Victory is mine, victory is mine  
Victory today is mine.*

Thank you.