

Still Determined: A Chance for Redemption  
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About the artist

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Mayor Nikuyah Walker is comfortable speaking uncomfortable truths. Now in her fourth year in the role of Charlottesville's first Black female mayor, Walker has become accustomed to speaking her mind based on the facts as she sees them, without regard to who does or doesn't like what she has to say.

"Nothing has changed," is her straightforward response to the question of what meaningful change has taken place during her tenure.

"I'm sure if there was someone else answering this question, they would celebrate the small victories, but I'm not that person," she said flatly. "We have so long to go."



Mayor Nikuyah Walker.

The region's handling of the COVID-19 crisis supports, at least in part, Walker's assessment. Nearly 50 years after the ratification of the Civil Rights Act - which chipped away at America's legal caste system by banning segregation and discrimination by employers - Black Americans and other people of color still endure disproportionate social, legal and economic challenges, as reflected by the coronavirus' outsized impact on their communities. Locally, Black and Latino residents of the Blue Ridge Health District (BRHD) comprise 41.5% of COVID-19 hospitalizations and nearly 22% of deaths from the disease, according to the latest available data, despite both groups making up hardly more than a quarter of the BRHD's 250,000 residents.

"What we saw with COVID," said Walker, "when we look at who was being impacted by it the most, and who was getting the vaccine first, those processes were fueled by the same systemic racism that fuels many inequities here."

To date, the Virginia Department of Health reports 66,587 people living in the city of Charlottesville and Albemarle, Fluvanna, Greene, Louisa and Nelson counties have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. The vast majority of these people are white, whereas people of color - Blacks, Latinos, Indigenous Americans and Asian Americans - account for 7,746 of this at least partially vaccinated group. The Blue Ridge Health District, after coming under fire from some community members for the initial vaccine distribution that largely excluded people of color, has ramped up its efforts towards equity, partnering with several organizations to host vaccination events targeting Blacks and Latinos.

"Charlottesville addressed [the coronavirus and vaccination] in the way that things are typically done," said Walker. "We categorize people based on deeply rooted inequity systems in this country. Very little has changed."



Dr. Max Luna, a cardiologist and associate professor at the University of Virginia and founder of the Latino Health Initiative.

Understanding and mitigating systemic inequities, and the unique health and wellness challenges they present to the local Latino community, are at the heart of the UVA Latino Health Initiative's mission and work. Dr. Max Luna, a cardiologist and associate professor at the University of Virginia for the past 13 years, founded the Latino Health Initiative about five years ago.

"We [Latinos] share with other people of color a higher rate of poverty and limited access to health insurance, similar to our African American brothers and sisters, although [Latino underinsurance] is higher," said Luna. "We share so much together, more than our differences; we're in this fight [against health challenges and disparities] together."

Luna said that in the Charlottesville region, “most Hispanics, more so even than the Black community, have limited access to teleworking.” Roles in the food service and hospitality industries put local Latinos at a greater risk of contracting the virus. Concurrently, Latinos have fewer resources to help them navigate COVID-19’s health, social and economic effects.

“Latinos ... have less access to a safety net via unemployment. Latinos have limited health literacy, to access and understand in detail our health system and vaccination information,” Luna explained. “Language gaps make it more challenging for Latinos, who maybe don’t have [the] language proficiency to understand resources and build trust with doctors, nurses and other providers.”

Even before coronavirus crashed the scene, the Latino Health Initiative was working within the communities they serve to fix these issues, listening as much as teaching, said Luna. The Clínica Latina, which the Latino Health Initiative runs in partnership with the Charlottesville Free Clinic, has been providing “free primary healthcare twice a month to Hispanics in their own language by culturally proficient physicians and students,” since 2016. The same year, the Latino Health Initiative formed the Cardiovascular Initiative for The Latino Community Health in response to Latino residents’ high rate of deadly cardiovascular disease, serving nearly 500 people so far. Since the virus spread across the globe, Luna said his office has continued to serve, providing COVID-19 testing, care and vaccine information in Spanish – online and in person – with a focus on cultural competency and compassion.

“We know that only 55% of the Latinix community in Charlottesville have reliable access to the internet,” Luna said. “What we have done is create a series of messages about the vaccine en español, in [a language tone] that wasn’t coercive and is easy to understand. Then we went to [the] Blue Ridge Heath District and said we need to have more access beyond the website; they have since given us the opportunity to do creative outreach with them.”

Luna said his group has visited five area Latino churches in the past month and contributed to the creation of a virus vaccine hotline in Spanish. They’ve partnered with BRHD and other groups to staff vaccination centers with Spanish language interpreters, “so that Latino people are comfortable when they come for information.”

Luna, like Walker, feels the current climate reflects the region’s long standing challenges concerning equity and health outcomes for people of color. The current moment calls for action and accountability, Luna said, from health district leaders, from his colleagues at UVA, from local leaders in the region.

“This is a chance for redemption.”

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