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BREAKTHROUGH LEADERSHIP

Liberty City native Yolanda Cash Jackson becomes first Black woman to lead county economic development agency

The government attorney plans to use decades of legal experience and Miami family heritage to guide Miami-Dade Beacon Council, a public-private partnership tasked with recruiting, retaining companies.

BY MICHAEL BUTLER
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In a Fort Lauderdale office adorned with countless awards next to her picture with President Barack Obama, an autographed Dwyane Wade jersey and art by Black artists, attorney Yolanda Cash Jackson feels at home.

Jackson, 64, is the newly appointed chairwoman of the board of directors of the Miami-Dade Beacon Council, the county's public-private economic development partnership tasked with recruiting companies to the area and retaining them. As the first Black woman ever selected for the influential leadership role since the council formed in 1985, her perspective is shaped by growing up in Liberty City the descendant of Bahamian immigrants that came to Miami in the early 20th century.

The Miami Lakes resident, who holds a law degree from the University of Florida, specializes her legal practice in government relations and lobbying, as a lawyer at the Becker law firm. One of her notable accomplishments was securing annual state funding of almost \$15 million for Florida's three private historically Black colleges — Florida Memorial University, Bethune-Cookman University and Edward Waters College.

Her goal of supporting the county's growing group of local business own-



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Fort Lauderdale attorney Yolanda Cash Jackson was recently selected to chair the Miami-Dade Beacon Council.

ers serves as motivation to tackle the challenging work in 2023 at the Beacon Council. She talked about it in a conversation with the Miami Herald. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

• **Question: How important is it to represent the community in your leadership role?**

• **Answer:** You can't grow up in Miami to be my age and not be impacted by something like the Beacon Council. My mentor Alan Becker (the late founder of the Becker law firm) was chair of the Beacon Council, so I got a chance to watch him. It was just remarkable to watch his commitment to Miami-Dade County. Having served in the Legislature, he had



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Yolanda Cash Jackson says her role as head of the Beacon Council will be as a bridge to bring ‘different perspectives to the table. ...Every community is important. Whether it be Little Haiti or wherever, we are all important to the economy and growth of Miami-Dade.’

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I have a special love for Miami-Dade County. My great-grandfather Charles Marshall came here in the early 1900s and my great-grandmother Rose Ethel Glass came in 1908. They represented a number of Bahamians that helped to settle Miami.

I am excited about being a part of what they left the Bahamas to come here to accomplish. I understand the history of Miami. My great-grandmother worked for the French family that was related to Henry Flagler (best known for building the Florida East Coast Railway from Daytona Beach to Key West) and her brothers came from the Bahamas. They helped build Miami in more ways than one. That’s what makes it really important that I now lead this economic development organization.

• Q: What does it mean for you to be the first Black female chair of the Beacon Council?

• A: It’s about being that bridge or helping bring other people behind you. I think the difference will be my bringing a different perspective to the table, and that’s why we have to have inclusion.

I can talk about Miami Gardens and I can talk about Overtown, with a perspective that nobody else can talk about, and they’re part of our community — a very, very important part. Overtown was the beginning of what Miami became and Miami Gardens was the future. We have

Formula One, we have Jazz in the Gardens and we’ve had Super Bowls, all in Miami Gardens. We can’t pretend that Miami Gardens isn’t a very important part of Miami-Dade County. Every community is important. Whether it be Little Haiti or wherever, we are all important to the economy and growth of Miami-Dade.

When we pay taxes, there’s no separation. So my tenure will be that of inclusion. That should be the goal of every chair to be inclusive of all of the business communities. Whether somebody is selling roti Caribbean flatbread or somebody is selling jets. I was at Opa-locka airport the other day where a Canadian company just built a hangar and was selling jets for \$78 million.

I also went to Lorna’s Caribbean & American Grill in Miami Gardens recently and they were selling a conch dinner for \$25. I want to make sure everybody’s welcome to do business. I want them to know that Miami-Dade County is open for business.

The other perspective that I bring is more of a global perspective. I have to deal with elected officials and non-elected officials. Anybody that’s doing business with the government gets a good chunk of our dollars. We’re helping people who want to come to Miami navigate government and all the other nuances to being successful in Miami-Dade County. I understand the intersectionality between government and the private sector.

• Q: What plans does the council have to address the regional housing affordability crisis?

• A: We are working directly with Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava. She’s been a longtime friend. We kind of started out in these nonprofit streets together over 20 years ago when I came back to Miami.

We are on this mission of economic development for those people who want to be here. The affordability of housing is a big priority of hers, so it’s a big priority of ours. We want to look at the entire business experience.

Recently, for example, we had a roundtable with local university presidents, along with the public school district superintendent because we have to talk about talent. The talent pipeline need is huge. We want to talk about affordable housing. People have to have a place to live.

They need to be not so far away from their jobs. They need to be able to get to their jobs. It takes me an hour and a half to get from Miami Lakes to our office in Coral Gables.

We’re concerned about transportation, and I know the mayor’s working on that as well. We want to support government. However, we want to make it so that government supports businesses and people want to do business. We want to let everyone know that we are open for business in Miami-Dade County, no matter what you look like or where you come from.

• Q: How do you think organizations could do better recruiting more leaders of color from diverse backgrounds?

• A: Creating an atmosphere that allows your employee or the person that you recruit to be their authentic self matters.

One of the reasons that I’m here at Becker for 24 years is because I have to be Yolanda. My office could look like this. No other office in here could have a Leroy Campbell painting or Mary McLeod Bethune picture on the wall.

But I can do that and put that up, and be very comfortable here, because they have allowed me to create an atmosphere where I could be my authentic self.

When I first started working here, one of the reasons I left litigation was they were trying to make me a white male litigator. That’s not happening. So I would say to create an atmosphere where you can be your authentic self and that’s easy in Miami.

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