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CHAMPIONS FOR DIVERSITY & INCLUSION



KAREN KALISH

Home Works! The Teacher Home Visit Program

BY RUTH E. THALER-CARTER

Karen Kalish is known as a “serial social entrepreneur.”

After teaching in Washington, D.C., for six years, she also worked as a reporter for several TV stations before launching Kalish Communications and writing two books. Back in St. Louis in 2001, she continued to work on education transformation and establishing a level playing field for the minority community. In St. Louis, she founded the nonprofits Cultural Leadership and the Books and Badges program within the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department.

In 2007, she launched Home Works! The Teacher Home Visit Program to focus on parent and family involvement in low-performing area schools. Through Home Works!, Kalish focuses on training, supporting and paying teachers to go to the homes of their struggling students in an effort to get their families engaged in their children’s education. An initiative with Patrick Henry Downtown Academy served nearly 2,000 people, and 63% of families said the home visits were extremely helpful.

What are you doing to help make St. Louis a more diverse, equitable and inclusive environment? I live by “stand up, speak up and take action.” I always bring up racism and notice when there are racial problems, such as meetings of all white people when issues affecting people of color were the topic. The status quo is not enough for me.

I host “Meet New People Parties,” where participants have to talk to some-

one they don’t know, and “Meet the Candidates” political events. Community leaders know they can count on me to host fundraising and educational events – as long as they honor my “Black and white house rule”: People of color have to be included.

What inspired you to tackle these issues? I saw my parents treat everyone with dignity and respect, no matter what someone’s ethnicity or position was. Doing the right thing and giving to your community is also critical to the Jewish tradition of tikkun olam – to repair the world.

What would you like to do next in regard to your DEI work? It’s not a matter of “what’s next” but of keeping on keeping on. There’s still so much work to do. My purpose in life is to disrupt the status quo. You can count on me to stand up, speak out and take action.

What is the biggest challenge for the St. Louis region when it comes to DEI efforts? Racism is baked into everything. Whatever the issue, racism is baked into it. Those who oppose efforts to change often see including minorities as giving something up, not realizing that the whole community would gain if people would only work together. We have a responsibility to play a part in the city.

What can others in the region do to tackle these issues? It’s the same people all the time; we have to get more people as partners. Realize how important the inclusion part of “diversity, equity and inclusion” is – being listened to, valued and heard. Never, ever let anything go by of a racial nature without commenting, because if you don’t speak up, you’re complicit.