

Pierce to be first non-white elected official in modern Edina

He has lived in the city for about six years

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James Pierce values making a difference, even if he can't see the immediate effects of his work.

To express this mindset, he likes to cite a quote from author Nelson Henderson: "The true meaning of life is to plant trees,

under whose shade you do not expect to sit."

Pierce, who was elected to the Edina City Council in November, says he plans to use the seat to make positive change in the city. And he's already set a precedent: Pierce is the first non-white elected official in the modern-era city of Edina.

"I'm asking the question, how can I make a difference? How does what I'm doing make a difference?" Pierce said. "That's what drives me in

everything I do."

Pierce grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, where his parents both worked in education. From the beginning of his life, Pierce has been told and shown the importance of serving the community. Montgomery's role as a center of the civil rights movement also played a role in shaping that outlook, Pierce added.

Pierce graduated from Tuskegee University in 1992 with a degree in computer science. Dur-

ing his time in college, he interned with Cargill, a company he would end up staying with for three decades and counting.

Soon after graduating, Pierce was offered a position with the company and moved to Minneapolis. After that, he hopped around to different cities for the job, including Dayton, Ohio; Memphis, Tennessee; Pella, Iowa; and several Minnesota towns. During that time, he also



(SUBMITTED PHOTO)

Throughout campaign season, James Pierce held meet-and-greets with Edina residents. During one, kids of parents at the event started holding up and displaying them.

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Pierce

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met his wife, Stephanie, and the pair has since had three daughters together.

After moving to his latest city, Edina, Pierce and his wife became even more interesting in being involved in the community and making a positive change in it.

“That’s very, very important for us. And we try to instill that in our daughters as well,” Pierce said. He has lived in Edina for about six years.

In 2017, Pierce went to the University of Minnesota’s Carlson School of Management to pursue a masters degree in business administration. This marked a shift from IT work, and Pierce is now in commercial business development with Cargill.

Work in the community

Pierce mentioned that one of his most notable accomplishments since moving to Edina was helping to lead the city’s Race and Equity Task Force.

For his work as co-chair of the Task Force, Pierce was awarded Mayor’s Individual Service Commendation in 2019. He was also nominated for the city’s 2018 Tom Oye Human Rights Award.

Beyond the city, Pierce is a member of the Cargill Foundation board of di-

rectors and the executive sponsor for the Cargill Ebony Council. He is also a board member for Connect MSP and MANRRS nonprofit. In the past, he has also served as a board member for the Metropolitan Economic Development Association.

Having known Pierce from the Cargill Foundation board, senior director Katie Clark Sieben said he always seems passionate about community change and innovation.

“He connects with people very well. And it’s just kind of in his nature to sit down with someone and easily kind of hear their voice and try to figure out how to help,” said Sieben, who is also an Edina resident. “I’m very excited to have him representing us.”

Between his community work and his job, Pierce finds time for several hobbies, particularly voice-over work, a craft he’s so enthusiastic about that he has his own studio. Some of his voice-over work has been done with nonprofits. Pierce said many people over the years told him he has a radio voice, so he thought, “I’ll give it a shot.”

Pierce is also a musician, playing piano and saxophone, and is an avid golfer and grill master.

Making history

While Pierce’s election marks a first for the city’s



(SUBMITTED PHOTO)

At a campaign meet-and-greet, James Pierce speaks with residents about the state of Edina and its future.

modern era, he is not the first non-white elected official ever in Edina. Beverly Claiborne “B.C.” Yancey, who helped form the village of Edina, was elected a “justice of the peace” in the late 1880s, according to the book, “From Settlement to Suburb: The History of Edina, Minnesota,” by Paul Hesterman. Charles Bruce “C.B.” Yancey, the son of B.C. Yancey, served as Edina’s village clerk and on Edina’s

school board through the early 1900s, according to city documents. This was when Edina was a village officially starting in 1888, later becoming an official city in 1974, according to Hesterman.

But in the modern sense of the city of Edina, Pierce is the first African American elected official.

Of making history, Pierce said more representation in the city allows for better decision-making.

“It’s not just because the diversity is present. But I think it’s more so because I may ask different questions because my background is different or how I was raised is different,” he said. “I’m going to bring a different lens to it.”

Pierce added that it also shows kids that anyone can be in an elected position – or in any role they set their minds to.

He saw this firsthand too: While campaigning, a 10-year-old boy asked Pierce if he would be the first African-American on the Edina City Council. After telling the boy that he had not thought about it but was likely the first, the boy responded by saying, “Well, that would be cool,” according to Pierce.

“When that photo goes up of the Council, and you see me there. I think that other kids that are different, whether it be they’re a different race, or what have you, I think they’ll be able to look at that and go, ‘Man, anything is possible.’” Pierce said. “It (also) helps them become civic-minded earlier.”

Looking to the future of the city

When he begins his term in January, Pierce has a few priorities for the Council. One is COVID-19 relief in order to help businesses. Another is finding ways to help schools be more effec-

tive in distance learning.

Pierce also said affordable housing is important, as the need for it “transcends” all stages of a person’s life. And lastly, Pierce said continuing work on diversity, equity and inclusion will also be a focus.

As a friend and Cargill colleague of Pierce for 18 years, SriRaj Kantamneni said that when he thinks of politicians, good things don’t necessarily come to mind. But this isn’t the case with Pierce, he said.

“Given the climate of our politics right now, we in Edina couldn’t be more grateful for having somebody like James in that role,” said Kantamneni, who recently moved to Edina. “He’s a servant leader. He’s humble. He’s charismatic. He’s genuine.”

For Pierce, it’s important to build a mutual understanding between people because that causes positive change in the city – regardless of whether he or anyone else who established the change is there to reap the benefits.

“If we get to a point where more people care more about the person next to them than they do themselves, that will make a better place, and you’ll always make better decisions because you’re always thinking about others,” he said.

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