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Contact: Donna Lockett,
Gaston Together
704-867-9869

2021 Gaston Together MLK Unity Awards will honor Brittain, Freeman and Funderburk

The Gaston Clergy & Citizens Coalition (GC3), an initiative of Gaston Together, will present the 2021 Gaston County MLK Unity Awards to Gastonia Police Chief Travis Brittain, Rev. Dr. Rodney Freeman and Shaaron Miller Funderburk on Monday, January 18th at 10:30 am. Due to the Covid restrictions for North Carolina, the event this year will be livestreamed through Facebook: Mt. Zion Restoration Church.

The Gaston County MLK Unity Award was established in 2004 by GC3. The award recognizes current or former Gaston County citizens who have performed exemplary community service to help **build bridges of unity** across lines of class, race, gender, faith and/or municipalities within our county. Names of the honorees are engraved on the MLK Monument located at the MLK Plaza in Gastonia. Some of the past winners include: Senator Marshall Rauch, the late N. A. Smith, Mrs. Lucy Penegar and Danny Jackson. Last year's honorees were Dr. Mark E. Epstein, Walker E. Reid III and John P. Weisenhorn.

Chief Brittain and Rev. Freeman are being honored together due to their work and partnership to promote, facilitate and help to spread community awareness of the GC3/Law Enforcement Covenant originally signed in March 2016. Both men have done exemplary work individually in building bridges of unity throughout their careers; however, the groundwork these two have laid together while putting the tenets of the covenant into practice has truly made a tremendous positive impact in our community. They have built a relationship between each other and their respective networks in the law enforcement and African/American communities that kept the worst from happening here in the aftermath of George Floyd and other killings as well as the Confederate Monument protests. To quote one recommendation for Chief Brittain and Rev. Freeman, "GC3 was entirely prescient in the need (for the covenant). These two individuals embraced, facilitated, and created out of whole cloth a movement that spared Gastonia the worst that could and might have happened...and lays the foundation for it to continue far into the future, continuing a proud Gastonia tradition of proactively addressing race issues (in the spirit of the Human Relations Commission in the early 1960's). I don't think there can be any more deserving recipients of a Unity Award named after Dr. King."

Chief Brittain was born and raised in Gastonia and graduated from Ashbrook High School. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Gardner Webb University and a master's degree in Justice Administration from Methodist University. He is a 2013 graduate of the FBI National Academy's 254th Session and received the Advanced Law Enforcement Certificate from the State of North Carolina. Chief Brittain has served the Gastonia Police Department for 25 years, the last six of those in executive management. He assumed his new duties as Chief on October 1, 2020.

Brittain serves on the boards of several community organizations, including the Executive Board of the Gaston Clergy & Citizens Coalition (GC3) and Habitat for Humanity, where he co-planned initiatives to build homes in areas impacted by crime. He is also a member of the Rotary Club of East Gastonia.

Dr. Rodney Freeman is a native of York, South Carolina. He has an Associate of Arts degree in Biblical Studies from Jacksonville Theological Seminary, a Bachelor of Arts degree in Pastoral Studies from Queen City Bible College, a Masters of Divinity Degree from Gardner Webb University and a Doctorate of Ministry Degree from Ashland Theological Seminary. Rev. Freeman has been the Pastor of Mt. Zion Restoration Church in Gastonia since 2000. He is the first African American appointed President of the York Rotary Club, York, SC and is the founder and CEO of Save Our Children Youth Academy as well as Bountiful Blessings Food Pantry both of which are in Gastonia.

Shaaron Funderburk is well known in Gaston County for her work with the Off the Streets Program, Inc., a program designed to assist women in getting off the streets and becoming free from street life, drugs, and alcohol. Tough love and strong leadership by Mrs. Funderburk, CEO and founder, have resulted in rehabilitation with many of these women re-entering the work force and life as capable, responsible, and constructive members of society. Shaaron knows first-hand what it is like to wake up and not know what has happened in your life for a period of time because you were “cracked” out of your mind and your best friend is a crack pipe. Shaaron took a good look at herself and realized that she had hit bottom, she said, “This is it. I have had enough, and I cannot go on living this way.” Not only did she change, now she helps others to change. Over the past 17 years, Shaaron has helped rehabilitate more than 1,000 women with a 90 percent success rate. She attributes this to knowing what it is like to be in their shoes which helps her motivate them to turn their lives around. Mrs. Funderburk is a Hunter Huss graduate and received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Johnson C. Smith University.

The presentation of the awards will be part of an annual event designed by the GC3 to recognize the dream of Dr. King for all. It is a dream very much alive in Gaston County. Please join the celebration as we honor those in our midst who have worked to build bridges of unity in our county.

The GC3 is a county-wide, non-denominational ministerial association formed in the late 1990’s by Gaston Together. The GC3 meets on the second Thursday of each month at 9:00am. Due to Covid restrictions, meetings are currently conducted by virtual format. For more information, please call Gaston Together (704-867-9869.)



Photo 1:
Chief Travis Brittain



Photo 2:
Rev. Dr. Rodney Freeman



Photo 3:
Shaaron Funderburk