

PEOPLE OF ACTION

Kendra Whitlock Ingram

President & CEO of Marcus Center for the Performing Arts
(Member since September 1, 2020)

In her first 18 months in Milwaukee, Kendra Whitlock Ingram's leadership and dedication to the city has already proven her to be a true Person of Action.

Kendra's commitment to the arts, and equality within this space, ultimately led her to her current position as President and CEO of the Marcus Performing Arts Center. From an early age, Kendra described herself as being a "total theater kid." She played an instrument from elementary school into college, and was involved in forensics, speech, debate and musical theater.



Kendra's love for the theater continued on into her college and early young adult career. After graduating from Duquesne University with a degree in music education, Kendra took positions as Management Fellow for the American Symphony Orchestra League and then Orchestra Manager for the Tulsa Philharmonic.



As a minority female in a predominately white male field, Kendra has had strong female and African-American mentors supporting her goals and celebrating her achievements along the way. "Looking back, that was a big motivator for me. With parents and other mentors telling me that I was capable of being a manager, a director, a president and so on. It was ingrained in me that I *could* do what I set my sights on," Kendra recalls.

With at least six different positions over nearly a decade and a half, Kendra moved west and took a position as Executive Director at Newman Center for the Performing Arts, University of Denver. When it was time for the Marcus Performing Arts Center to identify a new President and CEO, Kendra came to the top of the list. After former President and CEO, Paul Matthews, announced his retirement, Kendra Whitlock Ingram's charisma, experience, reputation focus on diversifying the theater in Milwaukee, it was no doubt she was the right woman for the job.

She was excited to take on this new opportunity and then, during her first full week at the Marcus Performing Arts Center, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down theaters across the world. While Kendra adapted to her new position in a new city, she was forced to navigate what it looked like to operate Milwaukee's largest theater through one of its toughest challenges. Not only did Kendra successfully lead the Marcus Performing Arts Center through a pandemic, but she did so while helping to raise funds for significant renovations of Uihlein Hall, bringing a great new experience to returning patrons.

“It has been an incredibly challenging, but rewarding, 18 months,” said Kendra. “Our livelihood as an organization relies on the success of live performances. I am continually grateful for our generous donors and theatergoers who helped sustain us while the stage was dark.”

For Kendra and many other performing arts organizations in the area, the show had to go on. Kendra focused her efforts on updating the Marcus Center. She also seized this unique moment in time to launch the Marcus Center’s REDI (racial equity, diversity, and inclusion) initiative, keeping her eyes set on inclusion and diversity in the theater. The REDI action plan contains goals in key areas of representation, inclusion and investment. The 2021-2022 arts and cultural programming at the Marcus Center helps the organization work toward several of these goals, including increasing representation of nationally and internationally celebrated BIPOC artists, as well as investing in programs that remove barriers to participation with Student Matinee offerings.



As a minority female in the theater world from an early age, Kendra knows just how valuable these experiences are for our community. Some of the most underserved populations in our city are just blocks away from the Marcus Performing Arts Center. “I want these kids to look at the Marcus Center as they’re walking by and know that there is a spot for them here,” said Kendra.

Along with the REDI initiative, the Marcus Center named former Green Bay Packer, Donald Driver, as the first cultural ambassador to help connect neighborhoods across the city with the Marcus Center. The four-year partnership with Driver as a Cultural Ambassador promotes the power of the arts, culture and community engagement by making the performing arts more accessible to underserved youth, families and communities of color throughout Southeastern Wisconsin.

When Kendra isn’t navigating a performing arts venue through a pandemic or creating historical diversity and inclusion initiatives, you will likely find her on her bike, Michonne, lovingly named after a character in *The Walking Dead*. “I like to think that my bike cuts through the wind just like a samurai sword through a zombie,” Kendra explained. She has participated in multiple triathlons since her first in 2013. After she’s finished a bike ride with Michonne, Kendra loves to unwind with her husband at one of the many beer gardens across the city - her favorite being Estabrook Park.

Relocating to a new city shortly before the pandemic brought everything to a halt is no easy feat. Over the last 18 months, Kendra notes that the Milwaukee Rotary Club has been incredibly welcoming to her. Kendra’s mother-in-law, President of the Ann Arbor Rotary and longtime Rotary member, encouraged her to join in 2020 and has expressed the value of being a member. During her time at Rotary in Milwaukee, Kendra has found through her mentoring of a University Wisconsin-Milwaukee student, her co-mentoring partner, Jim Ford, has been a mentor to her along the way.

As Kendra continues to lead the Marcus Performing Arts Center into a new and exciting era, she’s enjoying each step of the way.

Editor’s Note: Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by James Madlom