

ANNETT JAMES

When you look at the Boulder community, and specifically Boulder's communities of color, there are few areas of life that haven't been touched by Annett James. She is a passionate leader who has had an impact on everything from education, to housing equity, to the social environment of Boulder County. She is a proud mother of two and an active seeker of differing opinions and world views.



"I THINK I GREW UP WITH LEADERSHIP ALL AROUND ME...
IT WAS JUST ALMOST NATURAL."

Growing up in Mississippi, James was surrounded and inspired by stories of leaders in the black community, heroes like Ida B Wells and Fanny Lou Hamer. "The more you learn, the more you're just completely bowled over and you feel like you are not living up to what's needed," said James. But she didn't let that feeling of awe daunt her. Instead she found her way to CU Boulder after reading an article about Mary Francis Berry, a renowned African American, forward-thinking historian, activist, writer, professor, and lawyer who was at CU Boulder at the time. Berry left Boulder shortly after James arrived, but James stayed, weaving herself into the fabric of the community.

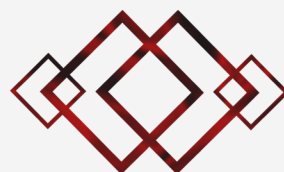
James' first official position of leadership in Boulder came via Dr. Charles Nilon, the first tenured African American professor at CU Boulder, and his wife Mildred Nilon who "were the glue for all of the black students who came to CU." Mildred was a member of United Black Women of Boulder Valley and pulled James into the group of movers and shakers where she eventually became a member of the board. In response to why she got involved, James simply said that she "loved the issues" and the work they were doing. During that same time, she also became involved in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom which was comprised of a similar group of powerful women dedicated to bringing together diverse opinions to work for permanent peace.

Over the time she has lived in Boulder, James has continued to be involved in nearly every aspect of life for Boulder's communities of color and specifically its black community. She was a founding member and became the president of the Boulder County chapter of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People a civil rights organization formed in the early 1900s focused on improving every aspect of life for communities of color and different religious backgrounds. Through her leadership, NAACP of Boulder County has tackled issues from housing equity, to safety, to education, to tackling the roots of the school-to-prison pipeline.

One of the projects that James is most passionate about currently is a program that the NAACP has started to work with local companies to improve how they handle issues relating to diversity, equity and inclusion. Many companies are beginning to see the value of having a more diverse and welcoming workforce both because "they understand that it's important to their bottom line," but also James says she is "seeing more and more that they are understanding the moral side" of how they do business and who they bring in to support that mission.

James and the NAACP are working to support these companies in understanding how they can hire, support and attract more diverse candidates.

Another project that has been taken on by the NAACP under James's leadership has been looking into legislation to combat the school-to-prison pipeline. This is the term given to the devastating trend of students being pushed out of our school systems and into the juvenile criminal justice system. This system has deep roots and recent changes such as zero-tolerance policies and police presence in schools, which were put in place to protect against the rise in school shootings, have led to a steeply increasing rate of suspensions and expulsions for minor infractions. Once in this cycle, many students struggle to get back on track with their education as the system is working against them. The education committee of the NAACP has been focusing on legislation that gets at the roots of this system in Colorado schools and is hoping to bring it to the next legislative session of the Colorado Congress.



When asked what she's most proud of, James turns to raising two successful children in Boulder. Raising kids is always a challenge but the added responsibility of "trying to create a safe space and also have them enjoy growing up" in a community that often times did not look like them or understand parts of who they were makes her all the more proud of who they have turned out to be. James hasn't only been a mom to her own children, however. Her family started hosting students from other countries when her daughter was 5 and they have hosted students from around the world including Japan, Angola, Korea and the Middle East. James brought these students into her home to give them a unique American experience and to learn from theirs. She strongly believes that the "way to change people's perspectives is [to have them] actually interact with people" and she has embraced this principle in many aspects of her life.

"DO AS MUCH GOOD AS YOU CAN FROM AN AUTHENTIC SPACE."

James' motto in life might sound simple but finding people who exemplify it to the level she does is anything but. In every conversation with James there are more little projects and accomplishments to be found that could easily be something to be incredibly proud of, yet they are just a part of her daily life. James says she is a 'results' person. She doesn't mind if the process takes a while or how many twists and turns the path takes as long as they eventually get to the place they need to be. Once she gets there, then she is on to the next goal as she continually pursues doing all the good she can.

When asked what she has learned from her international students she said it comes down to an appreciation that "the human condition is the human condition no matter where you are from."

James isn't the type to put herself at the center of her accomplishments or to lead solo. She is a self-declared "group person" whose leadership centers around bringing groups to consensus around important issues like diversity, health equality and education. She says she always lets the conversations in her meetings flow as long as they need to allow everyone to be heard. Though she says that letting people keep talking might be one of her flaws as a leader, our society's dominant view of leadership often does not provide enough space for this kind of listening. Plus, the progress made by the NAACP under her leadership shows the effectiveness of her focus on inclusivity.