

DAMON J. KEITH  
CENTER FOR CIVIL RIGHTS



WAYNE STATE  
UNIVERSITY



# BUILDING THE DETROIT WE DESERVE



DAMON J. KEITH  
CENTER FOR CIVIL RIGHTS

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC VISION

**2026-2031**



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# Building the Detroit We Deserve:

## FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC VISION

This strategic vision honors the extraordinary legacy of Judge Damon J. Keith and responds to this critical time in history when the freedoms he fought for are under threat. This plan is the product of reflections, research, collaborations, and attentiveness to what Detroit needs to continue the work of building a democracy.



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 @keithcenterdetroit

## The Legacy of Judge Damon J. Keith



Damon J. Keith was born in a segregated Detroit on July 4, 1922. Both as a lawyer and as a federal judge, he was a tireless fighter for justice.

His legal opinions changed the civil rights landscape in Michigan and across the nation. He desegregated northern schools, ruled against discrimination in employment, upheld affirmative action in police departments that were mired in deep histories of discrimination and brutality, and oversaw the longest civil rights housing case in history, vindicating the rights of Black homeowners in Hamtramck, who had been the victims of “Negro removal.”

Judge Keith stood up to powerful Presidents, making sure that no man was above the law.

Damon J. Keith Center Strategic Plan

One of Judge Keith’s defining characteristics was judicial courage. While many know what the right thing is, it is much harder to actually do it. Judge Keith knew what was right, and he persistently did what was right. Judge Keith had a will of iron, but he was also deeply caring and full of empathy and compassion.

He loved this country and cared deeply about its future. He famously wrote: “Democracies die behind closed doors.”

This strategic plan strives to live up to Judge Keith’s life and legacy. The Keith Center is fighting to keep the doors of democracy open for all. One of Judge Keith’s favorite aphorisms was “do the right thing – and be fair.” This strategic plan seeks to honor that admonition.



Democracies  
*die* behind  
closed *doors*.

# The Moment We're In



At this moment, the United States is facing a collision of crises. The forces of extreme wealth inequality and the skyrocketing costs of housing and basic needs are squeezing Americans from all directions. Moreover, there is a concerted effort to dismantle the institutional architecture of multiracial democracy, from the gutting of the Voting Rights Act and the unwinding of DEI programs to the weaponization of immigration law and the concentrated assault on the free press. These actions follow from a political order that understands that a fully realized multiracial democracy would redistribute power and yield a more just world.

Detroit knows this history intimately. This city has served as a laboratory for the worst of American structural racism and political disenfranchisement, but it has also been home to some of the most extraordinary organized Black resistance the country has ever seen. The movement in Detroit never waited for permission from Washington. Instead, Detroiters committed to the well-being of their neighbors and the self-determination of their communities built power from the ground up in churches, union halls, and on the block.

Today, the Keith Center enters this period clear-eyed about what the moment asks of us. We know defense alone will only manage the harm, and the harm is already considerable. The work ahead is generational, and it demands a sustained commitment to building a democratic infrastructure durable enough to outlast any single administration. It demands institutions, strategy, and communities with the capacity for self-determination. The threats to this work are real, but so is our answer to them. This strategic plan is our answer and our commitment to Detroit.

# Message from our Directors



**Angel  
MCKISSIC, PHD**  
Director

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

I stepped into the role of Director in October 2024, two weeks before the presidential election.

Since then, the country and the world have been dramatically reshaped by those who seek to consolidate power for the few. Amidst this, my task for the past 18 months has been to forge a path forward for the Center that both honors Judge Keith's life and legacy and meets the demands of the moment.

In this seismic moment of crises and uncertainty, the decisive question is whether we can build, whether we can develop the capacity to govern the conditions of our lives collectively. Detroit, as a site of innovation, cultural richness, and Black political power, offers lessons for this work. Detroiters have practiced self-governance under every condition designed to make it impossible, amidst disinvestment, removal, and a sustained campaign to persuade the country that Detroiters cannot govern themselves.

Today, we face a coordinated assault on democracy and civil rights. This is a defining moment not just for the Center but for the country. How we respond to the crisis unfolding before us will determine what kind of world is forged in the aftermath.

Over the next several years, the Center will be doing its part to build the world Detroit deserves, the one we all deserve. This strategic plan is how we begin.



**Peter  
HAMMER**  
Faculty Director

Wayne State University Law School

This strategic vision marks an important point of transformation in the evolution of the Keith Center, at a critical moment in our nation's history.

I chaired the faculty committee that sought and received University approval for the Keith Center Charter in 2009. The groundbreaking for the new building followed in 2010, with the grand opening in 2011. In the beginning, I served as the Keith Center Director and we only had a single, part-time Administrative Assistant. The founding of the Detroit Equity Action Lab (DEAL) and the hiring of its inaugural Director, Eliza Perez-Olin, were significant milestones.

We have come a long way since then. With the hiring of Asandi Connor as the current DEAL Director and Angel McKissic as the Director of the Keith Center, I have transitioned to serve as the Center's Faculty Director.

This Strategic Vision marks another important milestone in the Center's development. We take stock of where we have been, but more importantly, we set out a clear vision for where we are going. Director Angel McKissic has guided us through this planning process, and we are excited to share the results with you.

We are hitting on key catalysts for change: robust movement lawyering, disrupting structural racism, and doing the spadework necessary to cultivate an authentic multiracial democracy in Detroit.

Rooted in the Judge's legacy and guided by our strategic vision we are confident as we face our future and ready for the challenges ahead. This is the future Detroit deserves.



Our Democracy & Civic Power work will build the *infrastructure* and *imagination* that makes *multiracial self-governance* possible.

## Who We Are



The Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights is a university-based civil rights center housed at Wayne State University Law School. We exist at the intersection of law, journalism, democracy, and racial equity. We operate through four integrated programmatic pillars: democracy, movement law, combating disinformation and narrative change, and developing racial equity leaders. Each pillar responds to the various dimensions of the struggle for racial and economic justice in Detroit and beyond.

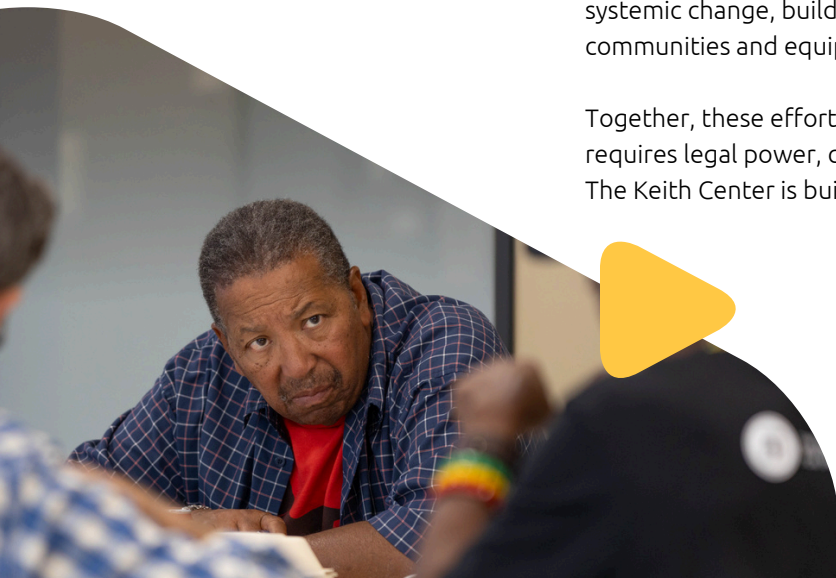
Our **Democracy & Civic Power** work will build the civic infrastructure and imagination that makes multiracial self-governance possible. Through civic education, narrative strategy, and community organizing tools, we are investing in the political literacy and collective power of Detroiters, particularly those most systematically excluded from political life.

Our **Movement Lawyering** work will equip the next generation of lawyers and legal workers to be accountable to and in service of grassroots communities. We believe law is a tool of liberation when wielded with courage and conscience, and our movement lawyering program will build the legal infrastructure Detroit's movements need to win in courtrooms, in policy, and for the community.

**Community Journalism**, anchored by the Race & Justice Reporting Initiative and its flagship platform VERDAD, produces reporting that centers marginalized communities, exposes structural racism, and counters the disinformation corroding democratic life. Narrative power is movement power, and we treat journalism as a civil rights practice.

The Center also houses the **Detroit Equity Action Lab's (DEAL) Racial Equity Fellowship** — the connective tissue between individual leadership development and systemic change, building a pipeline of racial equity leaders accountable to Detroit's communities and equipped to disrupt institutions from within.

Together, these efforts reflect our conviction that dismantling structural racism requires legal power, civic power, narrative power, and leadership working in concert. The Keith Center is building all four, in service of Detroit.



# Our Mission



The Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights trains movement lawyers, amplifies community voices through journalism, and cultivates the civic power and leadership needed to dismantle structural racism and build a multiracial democracy in Detroit.



# Our Vision

The Detroit – and democracy – we're building toward

We envision a Detroit and a democracy, transformed: a multiracial, self-governing society where all people hold real power, communities determine their own futures, and the material conditions of life, housing, health, safety, clean air, and economic dignity are secured for everyone. We imagine a world where structural racism has been uprooted from our laws, institutions, and culture; where the natural environment is protected and thriving; and where the full promise of democracy is not merely written in law but lived in the streets, neighborhoods, and governing bodies of our city.

# What This Vision Requires

## Multiracial Democracy

Electoral and civic power held by all people, across race and class, free from suppression and structural exclusion.

## Self-Determination

Communities, not distant institutions or corporations, govern their own land, resources, and futures.

## Economic Justice

Everyone's basic needs are met. Economic dignity is not a privilege but a standard no one falls below.

## Environmental Thriving

A living environment that is clean, protected, and regenerative.



# Our Values

1



## We pursue justice for all oppressed people.

We understand that freedom is not divisible — the liberation of any community is bound to the liberation of all, and we bring that conviction to every dimension of our work.

2



## We move with integrity in our work and relationships

We mean what we say, honor our commitments, and hold ourselves accountable to the communities we serve.

3



## We practice radical truth-telling

We name structural harm by its name, refuse euphemism where clarity is required, and insist on honesty even when it is uncomfortable.

4



## We practice collaboration toward co-liberation and racial equity

We do not work in isolation or competition. We build with our partners, share power, and recognize that the work of dismantling structural racism requires collective action.

5



## We practice transformative and visionary leadership

We are not content to manage what is, we are committed to imagining and building what should be.

6



## We believe in education for liberation

Knowledge is not neutral. We invest in education that builds critical consciousness, expands political imagination, and equips people to understand and challenge the systems that shape their lives.

7



**We are rooted in the history of Detroit and amplify community expertise**

Detroit's communities are not problems to be solved but sources of knowledge, power, and vision. We build on the long history of resistance this city carries, and we center community expertise in everything we produce.

8



**We practice bold and daring courage**

Judge Keith showed us that knowing what is right is not enough, you must act on it. We embrace the risk that justice requires and refuse to let fear of consequence silence what needs to be said or done.

9



**We approach intersectionality with intention and inclusivity**

We understand that race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and other dimensions of identity are not additive but interlocking, and we bring that analysis to bear in our programs, partnerships, and internal culture.

10



**We center humanity in everything we do, and practice dignity by design.**

Every program, every partnership, every decision we make is shaped by a commitment to the full humanity of the people we are and serve. For us, dignity is not an afterthought; it is built into the architecture of our work.

11



**We are committed to restorative practice both internally and with community.**

We are not content to manage what is, we are committed to imagining and building what should be.

# How We Developed This Plan

- This plan emerged from a rigorous, multi-stage process of benchmarking, ecosystem analysis, and direct community input, designed to ensure our strategy reflects genuine need, not institutional assumption. It is through this process that we generated our mission, vision, and strategic priorities.



## Benchmarking against peer institutions

We assessed the Center against civil rights centers across the country. What we found is that we are among the most community-rooted centers in the nation, but we had room to deepen engagement with our own law students and internal stakeholders. Our movement lawyering strategic pillar addresses this gap, building a stronger bridge between the law school and grassroots communities.

## Mapping Detroit's movement ecosystem

We mapped the Center against the landscape of movement organizations in Detroit, identifying areas of over-saturation and genuine gaps. This helped us find our unique lane. As a university center, we are positioned to build the imaginaries, theories, and legal power that propel democracy, but also help fill the basic needs of civic education.

## Listening to our stakeholders

We surveyed our advisory boards, Wayne State law students, staff, faculty, organizational partners, and community members. The consistent feedback was that we do well in keeping Judge Keith's legacy alive and building community bridges. But, stakeholders also challenged us to do more to leverage the law for Detroit's movement ecosystem.

# DAMON J. KEITH

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## Priorities

I Build Civic Culture  
& Democratic  
Power in Detroit

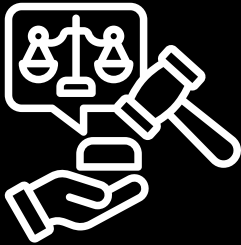
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II Catalyze an  
Ecosystem of  
Movement Lawyers  
and Legal Workers

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III Living Legacy:  
Activating the Keith  
Archive

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# Where We're *Investing* Our Energy

## Five-Year Strategic Priorities

Over the next five years, the Keith Center is building the infrastructure for long-term transformation.

### Priority I – Build Civic Culture & Democratic Power in Detroit

Democracy is not a fixed inheritance; it is a practice built and rebuilt by people who refuse to let it die. At the Damon J. Keith Center, we understand that the health of our democracy depends not on institutions alone but on the civic muscle of ordinary people and their capacity to name what is wrong, imagine what is possible, and act collectively to demand change. Detroit has always been a city of robust civic imagination and organized resistance.

This priority builds on that tradition. In the face of coordinated attacks on voting rights, civic participation, and the very idea of multiracial self-governance, we are investing in the democratic infrastructure that keeps communities informed, politically literate, and builds power. Through the Detroit Democracy School, narrative tools, and civic technology, we are building the conditions under which Detroiters don't just participate in democracy, they shape it.



## Programmatic Objectives

### ➤ Goal 1:

Increase civic literacy, political imagination, and community power to shape political decision-making at all levels of governance.

- Launch the Detroit Democracy School.
- Develop and launch the Find Your Fight App.

### ➤ Goal 2:

Transform narratives around democracy, power, and solidarity.

- Produce stories, resources, and multimedia about local democracy, resistance, and visionary alternatives.
- Amplify analysis and visions of democracy through op-eds and media features.



## Priority II – Catalyze an Ecosystem of Movement Lawyers and Legal Workers

The law has been one of the most powerful instruments of racial domination in American history. Law has also been one of the most powerful instruments for liberation. Judge Keith spent 52 years demonstrating that the law, wielded with courage and conscience, can vindicate the rights of those this country has tried hardest to oppress.

This priority carries that conviction forward. Detroit's grassroots movements are doing transformative work, but they operate too often without adequate legal support, leaving organizers vulnerable, campaigns under-resourced, and hard-won victories unprotected.

The Keith Center is positioned to help close that gap. By training a new generation of movement lawyers and legal workers who are accountable to communities rather than institutions, we are building a legal infrastructure that treats the law as a tool of liberation, not a barrier to it.

## Programmatic Objectives

### > Goal 1

Cultivate a legal infrastructure in Detroit that democratizes legal expertise and is directly accountable to grassroots leadership.

- Establish the Movement Lawyering Academy for law students, attorneys, paralegals, and community legal workers.
- Catalyze the local legal infrastructure to support grassroots-led organizing.



## Priority III – Living Legacy: Activating the Keith Archive

History is a resource, a tool, and a mirror. The Damon J. Keith Collection of African American Legal History and the artifacts of Judge Keith's chambers represent one of the most significant repositories of civil rights memory in the Midwest, and they belong to Detroit. Yet archives only fulfill their purpose when they are alive, when they are accessed, studied, taught, debated, and used to make sense of the present. This priority is premised on the conviction that Judge Keith's legacy continues in the struggle for justice. By expanding engagement with the Collection, transforming chamber artifacts into civic education tools, and securing a permanent home for the Marching Towards Justice exhibition, we are ensuring that the history of the freedom struggle in Detroit remains a source of power, not just memory, for the next generation of movement builders.



1

Increase local and national visibility and engagement with the Keith Collection of African American Legal History.

2

Activate Judge Keith's chamber artifacts as living tools for civic education and movement-building.

3

Identify a permanent home for the Marching Towards Justice exhibition

# Our Strategic Plan Builds On Existing Programs

The strategic priorities build upon existing programmatic excellence at the Keith Center: the Detroit Equity Action Lab (DEAL), and the Race and Justice Reporting Initiative (RJRI), each with its own director, community of practice, and theory of change. The goals of these initiatives are listed in full because the work of dismantling structural racism requires both the leadership development capacity of the DEAL and the the narrative power that the RJRI and honest journalism produces.



## Detroit Equity Action Lab (DEAL)

Movements need leaders who are rooted in community, accountable to the people most harmed by structural racism, and equipped with both the political analysis and the practical tools to transform the organizations and systems they work within. The Detroit Equity Action Lab was built on that conviction. Through the Racial Equity Fellowship and its leadership development curriculum, DEAL cultivates a pipeline of racial equity leaders who understand Detroit's history, are fluent in the language and practice of structural change and remain accountable to systematically marginalized communities. Under the leadership of Asandi Conner, DEAL is the connective tissue between individual transformation and systemic change: the place where leadership development and movement-building meet.

### ➤ Goal 1

Co-create and implement an engagement strategy with and for fellowship alumni.

### ➤ Goal 2

Purposefully weave DEAL's values into the fellowship design and rhythm.

### ➤ Goal 3

Build new relationships with and introduce DEAL to organizations and leaders doing racial equity work.

### ➤ Goal 4

Expand and diversify DEAL's revenue base by developing individual donor support within the DEAL network, community, and alumni, and by establishing an online giving infrastructure



## Race & Justice Reporting Initiative

Journalism is not neutral; it never has been. The stories a society tells about itself determine what it sees as possible, who it recognizes as fully human, and which harms it decides to name and which it allows to persist in silence. Corporate consolidation, vanishing local newsrooms, and disinformation have left Detroit's Black, Brown, immigrant, and working-class neighborhoods misrepresented and invisible in their own story. The Race & Justice Reporting Initiative, led by Martina Guzman, exists to change that by enabling journalism that exposes structural racism, amplifies community expertise, and insists on an accurate account of Detroit's challenges and possibilities. Its innovative platform, VERDAD, extends this work into radio —transcribing and translating broadcasts into searchable insights for journalists tracking narratives shaping public understanding.

### > Goal 1

Scale VERDAD as a national and international monitoring platform and reporting tool.

### > Goal 2

Build a sustainable pipeline for journalists of color covering underreported communities.

### > Goal 3

Position Detroit as a national hub for community-centered racial justice journalism.



# Meet Our Team



Our team brings together dedicated leaders, advocates, and changemakers committed to advancing civil rights, racial equity, and democracy in Detroit.

Guided by the legacy of Judge Damon J. Keith, we work at the intersection of law, journalism, and community power to drive meaningful change. From visionary directors to program coordinators and fellows, each member plays a vital role in building a more just, inclusive, and empowered future for the communities we serve.



**Angel McKissic, PhD**  
Director



**Peter Hammer**  
Faculty Director



**Martina Guzman**  
Director, Race & Justice Reporting Initiative



**Asandi Conner**  
Director, Detroit Equity Action Lab (DEAL)



**Rhiannon Chester-Bey**  
DEAL Fellowship Manager



**Aysha Jamali**  
DEAL Communications & Marketing Specialist



**Charnise Tate**  
DEAL Program Engagement Coordinator



**Pallavi Gupta**  
Program Operations Coordinator





## EXTERNAL ADVISORY BOARD

Our External Advisory Board is composed of respected leaders and experienced professionals who provide strategic guidance, insight, and accountability to our work.

Drawing from diverse backgrounds in law, policy, and community leadership, they help strengthen our mission and ensure our efforts remain impactful, relevant, and community-centered. Their expertise and commitment play a crucial role in advancing our vision of justice, equity, and a thriving multiracial democracy in Detroit.

**Judge Eric Clay**

**John Booth**

**Mitra Jafary**

**Alex Parrish**



**The work  
continues with  
all of us.**



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