

NC Junior League, A Statewide Conversation on Inequities
Speaker Bios

Dr. Sonny Kelly

Dr. Sonny Kelly is a world class performer, story teller, motivator, speaker, and comedian. He holds a PhD in Communication & Performance Studies from UNC Chapel Hill (2020). Sonny is also a graduate of St. Mary's University (MA, Communication Studies, 2008) and Stanford University (BA, International Relations, 1998). After serving our nation as a U.S. Air Force officer, Sonny has gone on to serve as non-profit organization director, university admissions counselor, award winning pharmaceutical salesman, college communications instructor, and a church youth pastor. As a lover of theater and performance, Sonny has acted professionally on stage and television for over 20 years. He is also a writer and director of live theater as well as the creator and co-host



of the CrossOver radio show on WIDU Radio in Fayetteville, NC. As a professional storyteller, he has performed for the National Association of Black Storytellers, the Black Storytellers' Alliance, as well as schools, businesses and civic organizations across the country. He is a proud participant in the Fayetteville Cumberland County Arts Council's Artists in Schools. As a professor and scholar, Sonny's research and work focus on interpersonal communication, performance, critical pedagogy and public speaking. His research is based upon developing trauma-informed performance-based interventions to empower under-served youth to counter the School to Prison Pipeline. On March 11, 2002, Sonny committed his life to Jesus Christ, and has sought to share God's love with everyone in his midst ever since. He is also the blessed husband of Elenah and father of Sterling and Langston. No matter where he is, or what he is doing, Dr. Kelly's passion for teaching, engaging and empowering others through love is unmistakable!

Representative Brandon Lofton

Representative Brandon Lofton is a dedicated and thoughtful leader. He was raised by a public school teacher and a Marine. They instilled in him a sense of community service, and that is a value that Brandon and his wife Kellie teach their young sons, Caleb and Brandon II. Brandon is a respected member of the Finance Committee and an independent thinker who has worked across the aisle to get things done.

Of the 33 bills he sponsored or cosponsored in his first legislative session, 72% had bipartisan support. HB 732, a bill that helps small nonprofits (including PTAs), passed the



House with a unanimous vote.

Brandon takes initiative on issues critical to our state's future. On the first day of the legislative session, he cosponsored HB5 to expand Medicaid in our state and make healthcare more affordable for 500,000 North Carolinians.

After the 9/11 surprise vote to override Gov. Roy Cooper's budget veto, Brandon filed HR 1021 to prevent future deceptive tactics to deprive voters of true representation. Brandon believes public servants should lead with integrity and work to find common ground to pass legislation rather than treat lawmaking like it's a game.

Prior to serving Charlotte in the state house, Brandon served on the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing Advisory Board, chaired the board for the Council for Children's Rights, chaired the city of Charlotte's Disparity Study Advisory Committee and helped revise the city's small business program.

Brandon's leadership and service has been recognized with the North Carolina Bar Association Citizen Lawyer Award, the Charlotte Business Journal 40 Under 40 Award, the Charlotte Chamber's Young Professionals Business Leader for small to mid-sized companies and Uptown Charlotte Magazine Community Catalyst Award.

He attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he graduated with highest honors and met his wife. He earned his law degree from New York University School of Law, where he was a Root-Tilden-Kern Scholar and a Dean's Scholar.

Brandon is a partner with the law firm Robinson Bradshaw, where he focuses his practice in the area of public finance. He advises and represents cities, counties, hospitals, universities and non-profits financing capital improvements that benefit the public. He began his legal career practicing with the civil rights law firm Ferguson Stein Chambers.

Melanie Black Dubis

Melanie Black Dubis is a Partner at handles complex patent, securities, and other business disputes at the trial and appellate level for corporate and individual clients in the pharmaceutical, manufacturing, insurance, financial services, energy, and technology industries.

She has experience in North Carolina state and federal courts, the U.S. Courts of Appeals for the Fourth and Federal Circuits, and in arbitration proceedings.

Melanie represented low-wealth school districts in what has been described as one of "the most im-



portant North Carolina Supreme Court rulings in living memory.” The Leandro case established the state constitutional right to a sound basic education for all public school students in North Carolina. After a five-week trial, the trial court ruled in the plaintiff low-wealth school districts’ favor. The trial court’s rulings were largely upheld by the Supreme Court in 2004. Since 2004, the case has resulted in an increase of more than \$1 billion in funding for at-risk students in every county of North Carolina. *Hoke County Board of Education v. State*, 358 N.C. 605 (2004).

Melanie has represented generic pharmaceutical manufacturers in patent litigation under the Hatch-Waxman Act, served as national defense counsel in class action lawsuits involving insurance regulations pending in multiple federal jurisdictions, and defended clients in false advertising and unfair competition claims filed by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). She also represents corporations and their boards of directors in derivative actions.

She appreciates that her clients benefit from doing business in a thriving business region with a high quality of life, and she plays an active role in keeping the Raleigh-Durham area at the top of the “best of” lists through service on numerous boards and committees. Among her honors and awards, Melanie received the 2014 North Carolina Foundation for Public School Children's Champion for Children Award.

Susan Gale Perry

Susan Gale Perry was appointed to the role of Deputy Secretary for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS) in April 2017, serving first as the Deputy Secretary for Human Services and currently as the Chief Deputy Secretary. Susan provides senior leadership to the Department, with a mission of improving the health, safety and well-being of all North Carolinians.

NCDHHS has 17,000 employees and an annual budget of \$20 billion serving as the home to NC Medicaid, Public Health, Mental Health/IDD/SUD, State Operated Hospitals and Facilities, Economic Services, Aging and Adult Services, Child Welfare, Early Childhood Education, Employment Services, and Health Services Regulation.

Susan has experience leading complex early childhood and human services systems and organizations at the local, state and national levels. Her primary work, expertise and passion has focused on early childhood development and well-being.

Prior to coming to NCDHHS, Susan served in several executive roles, including Executive Director for the state of Delaware Office of Early Learning, appointed by Governor Jack Markell; founding Executive Director for the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation; Senior Direc-



tor for Policy and Programs at The North Carolina Partnership for Children; and Deputy Executive Director at Child Care Aware of America.

Susan holds an MA in Early Childhood Education from Concordia University – St. Paul and a BA from Hamilton College. She is committed to relentlessly pursuing what is possible in partnership with others and igniting change that leads to better well-being, opportunity and success for all people – especially young children.

Cassandra Brooks

Mrs. Cassandra Brooks is the owner and operator of Little Believer's Academy Inc. (LBA). Mrs. Brooks started a family childcare home in June 2009 and the business has been growing ever since. Mrs. Brooks began childcare operations out of the family residence and one year after inception she had to prepare for expansion to meet the demand for the quality care she provided. The growth continued to include two full-time five star, STEM centers dedicated to quality childcare and families that otherwise would not be able to afford it. Little Believer's Academy has NC pre-K classrooms and provide activities that create opportunities for children to learn in a safe and healthy environment. LBA provides a loving atmosphere that supports the development of self-esteem and self-confidence, and provides good models and tools to be successful in life.



These philosophies for doing business have enabled Little Believer's Academy, Inc. to become the success it is today. LBA is located in a low income area and has worked to create access to mental health counselors and social workers to help families and children work through trauma. Mrs. Brooks, along with the help of great families, created a PTO committee at LBA and it provides events and activities to strengthen families.

Mrs. Brooks is married with four children, including a set of twins! She is a member of Upper Room Church of God in Christ and helps in many areas. She is a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. and serves the community through various volunteer opportunities. She currently serves on the advisory committee for Wake County Smart Start and the board for the Partnership for Children of Johnston County. She is also an inaugural Member Mentor for the NCA-EYC. She currently serves on the board for the North Carolina Partnership for Children. In the past, she has served as chapter secretary of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. She also served as board president for her homeowner's association. In the past she served in management at International Business Machines (IBM). Mrs. Brooks has M.Ed. from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. She also holds a B.S. in Business Management from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University.

Elizabeth Redenbaugh

A native North Carolinian, Elizabeth earned both an undergraduate and a law degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has demonstrated her commitment to the children and families of her community through her service as president of the Junior League of Wilmington, as a member of the New Hanover County Council of PTA's Executive Board, and as a member of the Board of Directors of Port City Community Church. Elizabeth is the former Chair of the New Hanover County Democratic Party and currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Child Development Center and the North Carolina Foundation for Public School Children. Elizabeth was elected to serve on the New Hanover County Board of Education in 2008. She was presented with The John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award, the nation's most prestigious honor for public servants, in May 2011 for standing up against racial segregation in school redistricting plans. Elizabeth was celebrated in May 2012 as a Woman of Achievement by the YWCA of the Lower Cape Fear for the positive impact her public service has made on her community. She and her husband, Jamie, of twenty-three years make their home in Wilmington and are the proud parents of three children: Zach, Austin, and Kate. Zach is a junior at NC State University majoring in Biomedical Engineering. Austin is a freshman at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill majoring in Mathematics. Their youngest, Kate, is a sophomore at John T. Hoggard High School.



Dr. Jamila Simpson

Jamila Simpson is the Assistant Dean for Academic Programs, Student Diversity and Engagement for the College of Sciences at North Carolina State University. In this role, Dr. Simpson is responsible for working to enhance the experience of all students in the College of Sciences, with special emphasis on the recruitment, retention and graduation students who are traditionally underrepresented in the biological, physical and mathematical sciences (Black/African American, Native, Latinx, Pacific Island populations).

Jamila is an alumna of NC State and the College of Sciences. In 2000, she received her bachelor's degree in meteorology, making her the first African American female to receive the degree from the university. She



continued with her education at NC State to receive her master's and doctoral degrees in science education. Simpson's research examines culture and its impact on students and educators in science education.

Her professional experience also includes work with The Science House through the Center for Environmentally Responsible Solvents and Processes as well as working for the NC State Climate Office, NC Museum of Natural Sciences and the UNC-Chapel Hill Morehead Planetarium and Science Center. In 2017, she was one of three recipients awarded the Morehead Medal of Science from UNC-Chapel Hill's Morehead Planetarium and Science Center, recognizing her work to increase diversity in the sciences.

Dr. Ronny Bell

Dr. Ronny Bell is Professor of Social Sciences and Health Policy in the Division of Public Health Sciences. From 2016 – 2020, Dr. Bell was Professor and Chair of the Department of Public Health at the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. Dr. Bell previously served on the faculty at WFSM in the Department of Epidemiology. From 2006 – 2016, he was Director of the Maya Angelou Center for Health Equity at Wake Forest, a designated Center of Excellence with the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities.

Dr. Bell received his undergraduate degree in public health nutrition from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, his Master's and doctorate in nutrition at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and his Master's in Epidemiology at the Wake Forest School of Medicine. He completed a post-doctoral fellowship in gerontology at Wake Forest before joining the faculty in 1996.



Dr. Bell chairs the North Carolina American Indian Health Board and previously chaired the North Carolina Diabetes Advisory Council and co-chaired the North Carolina Healthy 2030 Task Force. Nationally, he serves on the American Diabetes Association Health Disparities Committee.

Dr. Cedric Bright

Dr. Cedric M. Bright, physician and patient advocate, is the Associate Dean for Admissions, Professor of Internal Medicine, and the interim Associate Dean of Diversity and Inclusion at the Brody School of Medicine in Greenville NC. Previously, he served as the Associated Dean of Inclusive Excellence, the Director of the Office Special Programs and an Associate Professor of Medicine in the Department of Medical Education at the UNC School of Medicine. He served as the 112th President of the National Medical Association from 2011 to 2012 during which time he advocated in the White House for health equity, increased diversity in clinical trials, and increasing the pipeline of students of color into health careers. He was previously an Associate Clinical Professor of Internal Medicine and Community and Family Medicine at Duke University and a staff physician at the VA Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina. He started his career as a Clinical instructor at Brown University as the site director of the Notre Dame Ambulatory Center. Dr. Bright has served as a mentor for premedical and medical students and was featured in a U tube video developed by Diverse Medicine Inc. entitled “Black Male in a White Coat”. He was featured in the AAMC publication “Altering the Course; Black Males in Medicine”. He has spoken at the Congressional Black Caucus Health brain trust before on topics related to Veterans health, disparities within the VA system, and how to strengthen the pipeline of black males. In 2019, Dr. Bright was inducted into the Order of the Golden Fleece, the highest honor bestowed to UNC Alumni. He was elected for AOA at UNC as an alumnus and delivered the 2020 commencement keynote for the 2020 class at UNC SOM. He serves on the roundtable of Black Men and Women in STEM for National Academy of Science, Engineering and Math and has presented numerous grand rounds on the impact of Covid-19 on the black community.



Dr. Bright is a fellow of the American College of Physicians since 2012 and serves as a board member for the National Medical Fellowships Inc. and on the W. Montague Cobb/ NMA Health Institute. He served as the chair for the Boys and Girls Club of Durham and Orange Counties and the Lincoln Community Health Center. He is a member of Sigma Pi Phi and the Omega Psi Phi fraternities.

He is a dedicated clinician, community servant leader, husband, and father, as well as a mentor to many.