

# Shining a Spotlight on Black Fundraisers

By EMILY HAYNES

**L**ONGTIME FUNDRAISER Kia Croom was in a rut. She felt unsatisfied and undervalued at work. She had long been one of the only people of color at meetings with donors or other fundraisers, and she was tired of feeling invisible or tokenized. Then something happened that reinvigorated her: She met her hero, Johnnetta Cole.

Cole is best known as the first Black woman president of Spelman College and later Bennett College, the nation's two historically Black colleges for women. With tears in her eyes, Croom introduced herself to Cole at a gala in 2017. For nearly 20 years, she had watched Cole break new ground for Black women in academe, philanthropy, and corporate board rooms. Her successes inspired Croom.

Hearing this, Cole took Croom's hands in hers and looked into her eyes. "You are a Black advancement officer," she said. "Do you know how valuable you are?"

The question startled Croom, who more than once had worked with white superiors who signaled that they didn't value her perspective. They would routinely interrupt her and other Black women colleagues, exclude her from meetings, and dominate conversations with donors. She recalls one white nonprofit leader who would point at fundraisers of color and introduce them rather than let them speak for themselves.

"It was almost as though we weren't trusted to introduce ourselves and foster a relationship with these external partners," she says.

She was unhappy because she wasn't tapping into her potential, she realized. How many other Black fundraisers were feeling that way?

Croom, who is now director of corporate relations at the Children's Defense Fund, has raised nearly \$4 million for nonprofits throughout her career. But last year, reeling from George Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis police officer, she considered what she could do to push for equity in her own line of work.

"I've been quiet about a lot of discrimination that I've been subject to, a lot of racism in the workplace that I've been subject to," Croom says. "It has not gotten me anywhere."

**S**HE DECIDED to go public, launching the Black Fundraisers' Podcast to talk with her peers about racial inequity in philanthropy and spotlight the achievements of Black development professionals. Interviewing guests came naturally to Croom, who earned her undergraduate degree in journalism. "Relationship-building is my jam," she says.

She interviewed Cole on the show's first season, along with social entrepreneur and equity advocate Trabian Shorters, longtime fundraising executive Dianna Campbell, and other Black leaders in philanthropy. Guests frequently thank her for focusing on Black professionals in a field where they are often overlooked.

Croom is not afraid to get personal with her guests. She is quick to mention how her experiences as a poor kid in Oakland, Calif., fuel her commitment to funding nonprofit work. And she likes

to close each episode with bonus questions that give insight into who the guest is outside of work.

Music — particularly gospel, hip-hop, and rap — is a source of inspiration for Croom. She turns to it when news headlines make the burden of inequity feel especially heavy. Her favorite rap songs help her refocus on the task at hand, she says. Before speaking engagements, she likes to listen to "Optimistic" by the gospel group Sounds of Blackness.

"You can win as long as you keep your head to the sky," the chorus goes.

That's an outlook Croom wants to share with her fellow Black fundraisers. She has pledged to spend the next decade mentoring and supporting 10,000 Black fundraisers. Sometimes that means sharing feedback on a young professional's ideas or offering encouragement over a virtual coffee

date. In January, she plans to launch several online fundraising courses for early-career nonprofit professionals. She expects these courses will help her meet her ambitious mentorship goal.

"If there are other Black men and women that share that same passion, and I can provide them with resources, with strategy, or just with moral support, then I want to do that," she says.

Croom squeezes in mentorship and podcast editing on the weekends when she's not with her teenage son. "I am a proponent of self-care, but I just get it done," she says. "I've never had the luxury, throughout my career, of taking it easy."

Even though she's busy, Croom is re-energized in her career and using the podcast to keep her commitment to advancing equity front and center.

"I've got an open door," Croom says. "That's what this is about for me." ■



**Kia Croom,  
Children's  
Defense Fund**

TERRANCE FORTE