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FOCUS: POVERTY IN BUFFALO

Attacking poverty in Buffalo is top priority for city's newest deputy mayor

By Stephen T. Watson - News Staff Reporter
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Donna M. Brown worked for the Kensington-Bailey Neighborhood Services group earlier this decade, and there she saw the dire poverty that envelops much of the city.

“You live, breathe and see it daily. So you get to experience it up close and personal in the neighborhoods, dealing with residents who just don’t have enough to make ends meet,” Brown said. “So you have to be able to link them to agencies or resources that can help them sustain [themselves].”

Brown now is Buffalo’s new deputy mayor, and she is tackling some of the intractable problems she previously confronted on the East Side.

She comes to city government with extensive experience in the private sector, holding management positions at General Motors, HSBC and LP Ciminelli construction company.

Brown fills a position that has been vacant since May 2006.

She is expected to oversee the efforts of Mayor Byron W. Brown’s administration to reduce poverty, create jobs, redevelop the city and improve Buffalo public schools.

“I think she’s a very bright, very competent and very caring person with an enormous challenge in front of her,” said Henry L. Taylor, director of the University at Buffalo’s Center for Urban Studies.

Donna Brown is spending her first weeks and months on the job reviewing the city’s existing anti-poverty initiatives and developing some fresh approaches.

“Her task is going to be to bring some order to development agencies in City Hall that have not delivered for the neighborhoods,” said Aaron Bartley, director of PUSH Buffalo, a West Side community organization.

Donna Brown doesn’t have a background in politics or government administration, but she did lead community relations efforts on Ciminelli’s massive Joint Schools Construction Project in Buffalo.



Friends and former colleagues say she has the intelligence and personality to succeed in this high-profile post.

“A bright, shining star has been added to the administration,” said Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples, D-Buffalo.

The new deputy mayor, a mother of two children enrolled in Buffalo schools, says she is ready for this latest career challenge in her adopted home city.

“At the end of the day, if we can help somebody achieve their goal and achieve their dream, then to me that’s what I constitute as being successful,” she said in an interview.

It seems to be a rule that every story written about her must note that Donna Brown is not related to Byron Brown.

This Brown, who is 47 and divorced, lives in the city raising 16-year-old Desmond and 12-year-old Nia.

“She’s a very active parent in our school system,” said Buffalo School Superintendent James A. Williams.

In her free time, Brown enjoys reading, watching a good movie and dining at Papaya, One Sunset and other favorite restaurants. She also reads the Bible every day.

Brown moved here with her parents from Harlem when she was 17.

One month later, she started classes at D’Youville College, where she majored in business management, and she decided to stay after graduating.

She worked initially at General Motors and HSBC, where she did budget planning and analytical research, before joining Kensington-Bailey Neighborhood Services.

“She’s very personable. She’s very approachable. She’s very friendly as well. We clicked instantly,” said Camille R. Jackson, employment manager at LP Ciminelli, who cited Brown’s ability to build relationships.

At LP Ciminelli, which Brown joined in 2002, she oversaw public and community relations and job-training efforts on the 10-year, \$1 billion program to rehabilitate the Buffalo public schools.

Brown was at Ciminelli when someone recommended her as a potential deputy mayor.

Donna Brown first met Byron Brown about 20 years ago, though they aren’t close friends.

The mayor was impressed with her during the interview process, and she was introduced as deputy mayor Jan. 10.

“I wanted to move forward with an anti-poverty strategy. I thought with some of [her experience] at LP Ciminelli that she could be the right person to pull that together,” he said.

Crafting an anti-poverty plan is expected to be Brown’s biggest task, a problem highlighted by the U.S. Census Bureau report last summer that showed Buffalo is the second-poorest big city in the nation.

While Donna Brown has only been on the job six weeks, Mayor Brown has been in office for more than two years. Advocates give him mixed reviews for his anti-poverty efforts to date.

“I almost think some of the momentum that we could have had has been lost,” said William T. O’Connell, executive director of the Homeless Alliance of Western New York.

Donna Brown is starting her work by collecting ideas in meetings with a wide range of constituents, including members of nonprofit groups.

She also is examining the best practices in place in other cities that could be replicated here.

But when asked for specifics of her plan, Brown demurred.

“I think I need a little more time for that one. You know, I’m still 30 days in and assessing all of the initiatives that we have already in place,” she said.

Brown, who will earn \$85,000, replaces Angela Joyner, a financial administrator for the City of Oakland, Calif., who was appointed deputy mayor following a national search.

Byron Brown brought Joyner to Buffalo to put in place CitiStat, the computerized, data-driven management tool.

But Joyner left in May 2006, citing personal reasons without elaborating, and the job remained vacant until January.

Mayor Brown said Donna Brown’s responsibilities are different because CitiStat is already up and running, so the city doesn’t need a deputy mayor to put it in place.

Peoples, the Assembly member, thinks enough of Brown that she urged her a few years ago to consider running for office.

Brown turned her down. But she didn’t turn down the mayor, and she shares his belief that good things already are happening in the city.

“It’s like this, I often say, this quiet thunder that’s building and this boom that’s coming for our city,” she said.

swatson@buffnews.com

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