

UNIVERSITY TIMES

Serving Faculty & Staff Since 1968

VOLUME 55
ISSUE 5: OCTOBER 21, 2022

Passion for creating connections drives Pitt's new place-based initiatives czar

Thursday, October 20, 2022

By **SHANNON O. WELLS**

In this quasi-post-pandemic environment, where once-bustling offices remain quieter as employees wearing sub-Friday-casual attire while armed with Zoom-loaded laptops work from makeshift home offices, Pitt's Keith Caldwell takes the opposite approach.

Caldwell is the new executive director of place-based initiatives in the Office of Engagement and Community Affairs. He and his staff are, by definition, out in the world — or more specifically, the greater Pitt community: engaging, making connections, addressing challenges while building bridges and relationships. Caldwell oversees operations at the University's two Community Engagement Centers, and is working to develop a proposed center in Hazelwood.

"It's intentional, and takes a lot of work," he says of the overall mission. "Our staff, across the board, really works hard to make sure that we're at every table possible within the community. There's lots of community meetings that are happening in each of these neighborhoods. And it's so important for us to be at that table — and primarily as listeners. We want to be able to always hear what the community concerns are, what the community's priorities are.

"There's places where we can respond or build connections. We're happy to do that," he adds. "But being at the table really makes a difference — and consistently being at that table."

Community Engagement Centers (CECs) are welcoming spaces designed to serve as the University's "front door" for greater Pittsburgh neighborhoods. Their mission is to strengthen communities as well as Pitt, based on long-term place-based partnerships. They are the most visible aspect of Pitt's Neighborhood Commitments initiative, a minimum 15-year plan for investment, infrastructure, programming and dedicated staff in neighborhoods like Homewood and the Hill District.

Familiar territory

Caldwell comes to this role after 14 years on the faculty of Pitt's School of Social Work. He joined the Engagement and Community Affairs team this past spring and stepped into the newly created place-based initiatives director position this summer. He says his classroom experience has served him well in the transition phase.

"I think in any new situation there's always a learning curve, but I've definitely had the opportunity to hit the ground running, I think," he says. "My work within the school was very much community engaged, including in the neighborhoods where we focus our communication centers in Homewood and the Hill District. So there were a lot of things that I was already participating in, in some form or fashion. There was a lot of natural transition for me."

One of Caldwell's first orders of business was to hire Michelle Stewart as director for the Homewood CEC beginning in September. A native of Homewood, Stewart joined the CEC after her predecessor, Daren Ellerbee, was named inaugural director of Pitt's new University Academic Outreach Center in January.

"That was an additional opportunity for her to connect with the community," Caldwell says. "In (Stewart's) case, reconnect in her new role (as) being someone who was born and raised in Homewood."

Caldwell and Stewart were greeted in September by a successful annual block party and celebration at the Homewood CEC. Caldwell says such annual events provide a way for his office "to continue to maintain and raise awareness about what we have available.

"It was wonderful to see the volume of community members and residents who attended, and the number of University and community partners who had tables to share information about their work and opportunities to connect," he says. "It was great for the whole family, and we had a beautiful day."

New hires, new space

Other Pitt staff involved with the Community Engagement Centers are Lina Dostillo, vice chancellor of engagement and community affairs, who heads up the team; Janilah Ducar, executive director of the engaged campus, which oversees the Oakland neighborhood; Paul Supowitz, senior advisor for community affairs; and Nena Ansari, assistant director of operations for the CECs.

That leaves an opening for director of the Hill District CEC that Caldwell and company are working to fill.

"We're embarking on another community-engaged hiring process, which, frankly, is a lot of fun," Caldwell says. "It's great to be able to pull community leaders into the process not only in the traditional ways in which people are promoting and sharing job opportunities, but really providing active insights into the qualifications and candidacy for this position."

Along with a new hire will eventually be a new Hill District CEC space. A renovation of the historic Granada Theatre at 2007 Centre Avenue will allow the CEC to move out of its current temporary residence in the Blakey Center on Wiley Avenue, known to many residents as the "Old Kay Boys Club."

While the current space sparks many memories for neighborhood residents who drop in, Caldwell says the CEC staff looks forward to being the anchor tenant in the now under construction Granada. "We're excited to be able to move over there and be just one part of the revitalization of such a community asset as the new Granada Theater. And what comes with that, of course, is all the opportunities for continued growth and University-community partnerships."

Hazelwood connection

Probably Caldwell's most daunting agenda item, however, is establishing the Hazelwood CEC, which is in the midst of a two-year planning process supported by Heinz Endowments.

With the neighborhood's key goals and priorities already identified, Caldwell's team is spending the time "intentionally planning, co-creating with both University and community partners, ways in which we can help leverage those life-sciences developments in a way that strengthens the community," he explains.

Areas identified include life-sciences infrastructure to support K-12 STEM education, workforce development opportunities for Hazelwood residents, and inclusive community development.

"We want to be able to partner with universities and community organizations to help ensure that the current Hazelwood residents, businesses and cultural community assets are able to remain and thrive as a result of this exciting new development that's happening," Caldwell says.

As engaged as Caldwell is with these projects and all that connecting Pitt with the neighborhoods and residents surrounding it involves, he still finds time to enjoy his friends and family. Caldwell has two children, a fourth grader at Woodland Hills Elementary School in Turtle Creek and another attending Woodland Hills High School.

"So they keep us pretty busy, between all of their sports and getting their homework done, and until they get driver's licenses, driving them every place they need to be," he says, adding it was his wife that got him to know Pittsburgh neighborhoods in the first place. "My wife is the reason I'm here. I'm from Maine originally, and in college met a girl from Pittsburgh — and that was it."

Shannon O. Wells is a writer for the University Times. Reach him at shannonw@pitt.edu.

Have a story idea or news to share? Share it with the University Times.

Follow the University Times on Twitter and Facebook.

University of Pittsburgh
Craig Hall, fourth floor
200 S. Craig St.
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

412-648-4294
utimes@pitt.edu

Archive

Volume 55-50
Volumes 49-27

Email Subscription

Name

Email*

SUBSCRIBE

Revised 06/13/25 Copyright 2025 Site by University Communications [Send feedback about this site](#)