

2 Black leaders join forces for city

To tackle dual crises, they leverage groups' strength and power

By **CHERYL HALL**

Business Columnist
cherylhall@dallasnews.com

First in a series

Fred Perpall and John Olajide start each workday with a 7:30 call to plot strategy.

The chairs of the Dallas Citizens Council and the Dallas Regional Chamber want to make sure their organizations are doing everything possible to fight the dual pandemics of coronavirus and racial injustice.

The duo established this routine shortly after COVID-19 set in and have continued it for five months, even when Perpall was on vacation with his family in his native Bahamas.

Perpall, the 45-year-old CEO of the Beck Group, is finishing out his two-year term as the Citizen Council chair. Olajide, the 39-year-old CEO of Dallas-based Axxess Technology Solutions Inc., is eight months into his one-year term as chair of the Regional Chamber.

It's the first time in history that Dallas' two most influential business organizations are being led

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Ryan Michalesko/Staff Photographer

Fred Perpall (left), chairman of the Dallas Citizens Council and CEO of the Beck Group, and John Olajide, chairman of the Dallas Regional Chamber and CEO of Axxess, are working together for their city to fight COVID-19 and champion inclusion.

Economic inclusiveness

Will 2020 go down in history as the year Dallas business started a new chapter in economic inclusiveness? Or will it prove to be just a temporary blip in social consciousness?

A diverse cross-section of Dallas business leaders weigh in. **1D**

Leaders fight to save jobs, businesses

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by Black men.

And they want to be sure the Dallas business community does all it can to save jobs and small businesses.

"I've heard the word 'unprecedented' so many times that it's losing its meaning," said Olajide (pronounced *oh-LA-gee-day*). "But with COVID, it's totally appropriate. Fred and I realized early on that the Dallas Regional Chamber cannot be saying one thing and the Citizens Council saying another.

"We needed to galvanize all the resources in our community to get through this."

Within days of the lockdown, the council and chamber, along with Visit Dallas and Downtown Dallas Inc., had a jobs website running on the chamber's platform to connect people who had lost their jobs due to the pandemic with companies that were hiring.

In the first six weeks after COVID-19 struck, Perpall and Olajide orchestrated and led a series of first-ever combined board meetings via Zoom.

"Why these meetings hadn't happened before is beyond me," said Olajide. "When we leverage the strength and the power of the DRC and the Citizens Council, great things happen."

Olajide and Perpall co-authored an op-ed in *The Dallas Morning News* in late March urging the business community to focus on initiatives that would save lives, ensure that

the area's hospital capacity was not overwhelmed and preserve the local economy.

The organizations immediately offered a lifeline to help small businesses navigate the federal stimulus package and get PPP loans through area banks.

To date, the council and chamber have raised \$3 million for the Revive Dallas Small Business Relief Fund for women- and minority-owned barber shops, beauty salons, small eateries, laundries and dry cleaners and other small businesses.

Olajide personally gave \$100,000. The Beck Group gave \$50,000 through its foundation and pledged another \$50,000.

For the first four months after the pandemic began, Perpall and Olajide were joined on their call by Kelvin Walker, the first Black CEO of the Citizens Council, and Dale Petroskey, president and CEO of the Regional Chamber. They continue to join the calls on Tuesdays.

"Both of them are doing a masterful job of communicating enough but not overbearing our members with it," Walker said. "If we didn't like each other so much, there would be a sense of dread at 7:30."

Olajide and Perpall recently gave a virtual talk to the Dallas Friday Group and discussed the importance of big business helping the small. "That's what a connected Dallas should look like," Perpall told the executive leadership forum.



2018 File Photo/Staff

Fred Perpall (right), Dallas Citizens Council chair, talks to Renda St. Claire and husband Rex Tillerson, former secretary of state and former ExxonMobil chairman and CEO. Perpall is finishing a two-year term as Dallas Citizens Council chair.

Earlier this month, Perpall and Olajide co-hosted another joint board call with Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas CEO Robert Kaplan as the featured speaker.

The duo is exploring ways to make this organizational connection a lasting one.

Bastions of business

Having two Black men at the helm of Dallas' bastions of business is a far cry from a photo that ran in *Fortune* magazine in July 1964 with a story about the business powerbrokers who ran Dallas. The board members of the Dallas Citizens Council, led by Dallas Mayor Erik Jonsson, stood atop Dallas' Memorial Auditorium with the skyline as the backdrop.

All two dozen of them were aging white men in dark suits.

Before now, the 83-year-old council and the 111-year-old chamber had a combined total of six chairs who were women or people of color.

Perpall is the Citizens Coun-

cil's second Black chair. Olajide is the Dallas Regional Chamber's second Black chair and the youngest one ever.

The timing of Perpall and Olajide sitting at the helms of these groups is not happenstance, said Toyota executive Chris Nielsen, immediate past chamber chair.

"It's easy for any company or organization to make bold statements about social justice in the wake of George Floyd," said Nielsen, executive vice president of product support and chief quality officer for Toyota Motor North America. "But the fact that John Olajide and Fred Perpall are in their roles today is the result of intentional moves by the DRC and DCC that started several years ago, not a reaction to recent events."

Work to be done

Both men ardently believe there is much work left to be done if everyone in every part of town is to benefit from the eco-

nomic miracle called Dallas.

"There's no question that our communities of color don't get access to the best opportunities economically and that there's an underinvestment in those communities," Perpall said. "We're working really hard at the Citizens Council side to bridge that gap."

Perpall and Olajide were focused on diversity and inclusion long before the murder of George Floyd created widespread civic unrest.

"It's shame on us if John and I don't use our roles as tools to help our communities of color prosper and thereby help all of us prosper," said Perpall, who sits atop a \$1.45 billion architecture and construction company founded by the Beck family 108 years ago.

"What is the benefit of having younger people and people of color in these leadership roles?" Perpall asked. "It's having true empathy for the communities that are being impacted — not just to know about it, but to have experienced it and

to have friends who are currently living it."

While neither of them participated in Black Lives Matter protests, Olajide spoke about the pain of being considered a second-class citizen at the Dallas Mavericks Courageous Conversations in June.

"No human wants their loved ones to be treated the way George Floyd was treated. I understand the outrage, the anger, the frustration, the sense of hopelessness, a sense of despair; I feel that. I live that every single day," Olajide told the gathering.

They both say they've experienced subtle and not-so-subtle racial jabs.

When Perpall moved into Highland Park seven years ago, he was routinely pulled over by police for rolling stops.

"I would like my peers who are white to understand that there are some things that I have to deal with that they don't have to deal with," Perpall

Duo works to bridge opportunity gap

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said. “But at the same time, when they put this article down, I hope they have an overwhelmingly positive feeling about our opportunity for the future if they would just engage a little more.”

Olajide said he didn’t know he was Black until he came to the United States because everyone in Nigeria looked like him.

He’s been asked more than once to fetch water at a business meeting he was attending. The first time it happened, Olajide didn’t say anything, got up and brought a water pitcher to the guy, who figured out later that Olajide wasn’t a waiter and apologized.

Now that Olajide has more confidence, he just responds with a blank look.

He and his brother were singled out and pulled over by a policeman while riding bikes in a group at the Sea Island Resort in Georgia. The police officer wanted to know what two Black guys were doing there. “We had to show our room key,” Olajide said.

“We’re making progress, but it’s a long journey. So I don’t get mad. These things happen all the time.”

Perpall and Olajide are also huge salesmen for the city.

“I tell my friends across the country, ‘I don’t think there’s a better place in the United States to be Black right now than to be Black in Dallas.’ I truly believe that,” Perpall said.

“Dallas is a frontier city and still is,” Olajide said. “If you go into a room and ask how many people are originally from here, you won’t find many. So clearly there is something about the Dallas spirit that is welcoming and embraces other people. It’s not about your family going back 10 generations or even three. It’s show up, perform and then you’ll be pulled in. That’s been my story.”

Agents of change

Perpall engages with an orator’s passion. Olajide is soft-spoken but equally ardent when it comes to talking about bringing more people to the economic table.

Both are naturalized citizens who grew up in large extended families of modest circumstance and were exemplary students and star athletes who came to this country as teenagers to pursue higher education and the American dream.

Perpall, who hails from Nassau in the Bahamas, was just shy of his 18th birthday when he arrived here to play basketball and study architecture at the University of Texas at Arlington. By the time he was 22, he had his master’s degree in architecture and was on his way to becoming a distinguished alumnus who gave the commencement address in 2014.

Peter Beck turned over his family company to Perpall when Perpall was just 38.

Olajide left Lagos, Nigeria, when he was 16 to attend Richland Community College. He transferred to the University of Texas at Dallas, where he received his telecommunications engineering degree in 2004. Twelve years later, Olajide became the youngest-ever recipient of UTD’s distinguished alumnus award.

In 2007, Olajide formed Axxess, which provides technology services for home health and hospice companies.

“From outward appearances, you wouldn’t see how similar they are,” said Petroskey, who considers both men close friends. “John is soft spoken. Fred is a louder voice. But they both live their lives with intentionality that makes what they do look easy.”

“They’re respected in every circle that they’re in.”

Senate and House

This symbiotic partnership is remarkable given the history of these two bastions of business.



File Photo

The board of directors of the powerful Dallas Citizens Council broke with a tradition of behind-the-scenes anonymity and stood on top of Dallas’ Memorial Auditorium in 1964 for a photo in *Fortune* magazine. All of them were white men. The council was — and still is — the elite of the city’s business elite.



Courtesy Dallas Regional Chamber

John Olajide gave his inaugural address as chairman of the Dallas Regional Chamber in January.

“They’re like the Senate, and we’re like the House of Representatives,” said Petroskey, who became head of the chamber in 2014. “They’re the CEOs of the largest companies, and we’re more grass-roots, with a broader base and larger audience.”

The Dallas Citizens Council is the elite of the business elite — CEOs and owners of the city’s largest and most influential companies and professional firms who can make things happen with a single phone call.

This is still a prerequisite for getting an invitation to join.

And therein lies the rub. “We saw that Dallas had changed dramatically, and we had an opportunity to change as well,” said Jere Thompson Jr., the immediate past chair of the council and retired co-founder of Ambit Energy. “All of us had worked really hard to find diverse business leaders of significant companies to step up, step in and play these senior roles. It’s just difficult. Fred came in with a sizable company and an incredible presence. He can go as far as he wants to go, wherever he wants to go. He’s that smart and that competent. So he was a logical candidate if he was willing to accept it. Ultimately, he said yes.”

The council currently has 170 members representing 107 companies. The largest companies — such as Toyota and AT&T — have two representatives. Annual dues run from \$11,000 to \$15,000 depending on the size of the company.

The Citizens Council is largely responsible for the city’s “can-do” moniker. It led the push for desegregation of DISD and the construction of North Central Expressway, DFW International Airport and American Airlines Center.

But in recent years, it has also suffered from political missteps by endorsing candidates that failed to get elected. It doesn’t make election recommendations anymore.

And it’s been criticized for being the mouthpiece of the Dallas establishment given its lack of diversity.

“I get this about the Dallas Citizens Council: ‘Don’t you know that was a racist organization run by all those rich white guys who controlled Dallas?’” Perpall said. “My feeling is the entire United States was built on racism.”

“The important word for me is ‘becoming.’ Who we were is not who we’re becoming. If those of us of color don’t lean in on the country that we could be and the city we want it to be — if we don’t go into these institutions and places and change them from the inside, we’re never going to become what we could become.”

It was four decades after that photo was taken for *Fortune* that banker Elaine Agather temporarily broke the gender barrier to lead the Citizens Council. Another decade went by before John Ware, former Dallas city manager and private equity executive, broke the

AT A GLANCE Business groups

DALLAS CITIZENS COUNCIL

Headquarters: Bank of America Plaza in downtown Dallas.

CEO: Kelvin Walker.

Founded: 1937.

Membership: 107 marquee companies that are represented by 170 C-level executives. It is guided by a 25-member board and a seven-member executive committee.

Annual dues: \$11,000 to \$15,000 per company depending on size.

Main focus: “To lead public policy areas of education, mobility, housing and quality of life and act as first responders for the Dallas business community in times of crisis.”
SOURCE: Dallas Citizens Council

DALLAS REGIONAL CHAMBER

Headquarters: Ross Tower in downtown Dallas.

CEO: Dale Petroskey.

Founded: 1909 as an economic development organization, represents about 800 companies of every size and industry. It has a 95-person board and a 30-member executive committee.

Annual dues: \$7,000 to \$50,000 per company depending on size.

Main focus: “To help make the Dallas region the best place in the United States for all people to live, work and do business.”
SOURCE: Dallas Regional Chamber

color barrier. Ware served only four months before dying of cancer in 2010.

Perpall became chair-elect seven years later.

Agather, the only woman to ever chair the Citizens Council, said the influx of national companies has added fuel for greater diversity, and Perpall enthusiastically heard the call.

“There’s a view now that we need to be more reflective of our community,” said the chairman of the Dallas region for JPMorgan Chase & Co. “Fred’s been a real driver of that. I’m a huge fan.”

Perpall was just months into his term when he and the selection committee hired Walker.

“My being hired by the Citizens Council was a signal that we wanted to think more broadly and inclusively in our community,” said Walker, who previously headed the Dallas private equity office of media

magnate Robert L. Johnson. “Fred’s eyes are always wide open about who’s not in the room.”

Right place, time

A few blocks away in downtown, the Regional Chamber’s leadership was also almost exclusively white males.

Dallas businesswoman and civic leader Liz Minyard was the first woman to be chair, serving from 1996 to 1998, followed by a 15-year gap before banker Anne Motsenbocker became chair in 2013. Entrepreneur Albert Black, who served 20 years ago, was the only previous Black chair.

But things have picked up of late with Latina attorney Hilda Galvan, a partner of Jones Day, serving as chair in 2017 and Michelle Vopni, Dallas office managing partner of Ernst & Young LLP, taking over as chair next year.

Nielsen said that he and the nominating committee had another kind of diversity in mind when they chose Olajide to follow him: Olajide is a bootstrapped success story.

“John Stephens from AT&T was chair [in 2018], and then I followed him,” Nielsen said. “So you had two big, global corporations and two career corporate guys. John’s an entrepreneur who started his own company in the tech space. In my view, that was an incredible step for the chamber.”

After the murder of George Floyd, Olajide called a special meeting of the executive committee to hear from Dallas Police Chief Reneé Hall, Black religious leaders T.D. Jakes, Richie Butler and Bryan Carter, and criminal justice reformer Doug Deason.

By the end of June, the chamber had established a permanent “super-committee” of board members for diversity, equity and inclusion. Policing and criminal justice issues are part of its oversight.

“There’s been a tremendous response,” said Petroskey. “Forty-eight members — more than half of our board — have signed up.”

The first organizational meeting will be held Aug. 25.

‘Gravitational pull’

T.D. Jakes, renowned bish-

op of The Potter’s House megachurch, is a spiritual mentor to Olajide and Perpall and said Dallas needs more people like them.

“They are emblematic of an emergent diversity pool that our city must embrace to remain viable,” Jakes said.

Grafton Ifill III, who was recruited to Dallas from Wall Street by Perpall, is a case in point.

Ifill said his cousin didn’t overhype the city. The 34-year-old executive director at J.P. Morgan Private Bank in Dallas said the business establishment helped him get plugged into the community from the moment he landed here nearly six years ago.

“You can feel the gravitational pull of the city to get newer executives to the city engaged and to ensure that people who come to Dallas from other cities really have a great experience here,” said Ifill, who sits on the board of the YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas. “Dallas is a secret that you almost don’t want to share with anyone, but at the same time, you have to tell them about it because you want them to come.”

Dennis Cail, a close friend of Perpall’s, says he’s cautiously optimistic about Dallas’ future.

“Fred Perpall and John Olajide leading these civic organizations as well as their businesses is a leading indicator that Dallas is primed to be a much more inclusive place,” said the Black founder and CEO of Zirtrue, a startup tech financial services company.

“But you don’t want this to be one-and-done. You know, a couple of these guys rise to the top and Dallas thinks it’s this uber progressive place, and then it just reverts back or remains static. This is the opportunity and the risk.”

Twitter: @CherylHall_DMN

Next in the series

John Olajide, CEO of Axxess Technology Solutions Inc., wants to make getting medical care at home as easy as ordering a ride share.

Fred Perpall, CEO of the Beck Group, gives his unvarnished take on what it’s like to be a Black CEO of a \$1.45 billion company in Dallas.