

# Keith Ellison looks to build from the ground up

BY TEVIN STINSON  
THE CHRONICLE

During a brief interview with *The Chronicle* on Monday after the Prayer Breakfast held at the Embassy Suites in downtown Winston-Salem, U.S. Rep. Keith Ellison said it's time for a culture change within the Democratic National Committee (DNC).

Ellison is vying for DNC chairperson. He earlier spoke to more than 1,000 people at the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day Breakfast Forum, also known as the Prayer Breakfast, which was sponsored by *The Chronicle* and the Ministers' Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity.

"We have to create a culture of reaching out to the voter," continued Ellison, "not to win over voters but to create a sense of community. We can literally create community through politics, and I think that has to be the goal."

Along with more community engagement, Ellison said if elected to the top DNC position, he will also look to de-emphasize television. At a place in time where technology can be used to talk directly to voters, Ellison said that could be a tool that can help build community.

"You can do a live stream video on Facebook and jump right over CBS, ABC, NBC, and CNN and talk directly to people. We can get local leaders on a national live stream telling people about the history of the Democratic Party and we wouldn't have to worry about the filter of network television."

On the weekend of Feb. 24, members of the Democratic National Committee will meet and vote to determine its new chairperson. With just over a month left before the decision is made, Ellison said, "I'm going to

put what I have to offer in front of the people and they're going to vote for me or they aren't."

"I'm not ego-invested in this. I'm going to help whoever does win and if I win, I'm going to ask them to help me."

Ellison said that to bring about real change when it comes to social justice and economic uplift, those who believe in democracy must take a page from Dr. King's book and build from the ground up.

Ellison reminded those in attendance that although Dr. King was one of the driving forces behind the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the movement started from humble beginnings in Montgomery, Alabama with the bus boycott.

"We have to start with our grass root organizations. Yes, Dr. King met with Lyndon Bates Johnson and other people who had power, but the real work he was doing was in the community. He was in the barbershops, the churches, he was knocking on doors," Ellison said.

"Back then politics didn't happen in Washington, D.C. politics happened on the local level, and if you and I are going to succeed in this era we must go to the people. It's hard to get change if you don't get people to consent to change."

The older brother of local lawyer and Forsyth County Democratic Party Chairman Eric Ellison, Keith became the first Muslim elected to Congress when he was picked by voters to represent Minnesota's 5th District in 2006. Late last year, Ellison officially put his name in the hat to become the next DNC Chairperson. With the race for the position heating up in recent months, Ellison said the same grassroots work that helped keep Minnesota a "Blue



Photo by Timothy Ramsey  
**Keith Ellison, U.S. 5th District representative of the state of Minnesota, is interviewed by Tevin Stinson of *The Chronicle*.**

State," and raise voting turnout by 5 percent in his district could have the same impact on the national level if all 50 states buy-in.

## Obama

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Salem told *The Chronicle*. "Here in North Carolina, as across the nation, when this president entered office, the economy was tanking fast: housing market meltdown due to systemic greed throughout the banking industry without consumer safeguards, among other things; unemployment reaching double digits and trending higher; inherited chaos in almost every category of our society that made this country exceptional. As President Obama leaves the White House, America's corner stone is on square. What follows his brilliant leadership against all odds by a hostile Congress, heaven only knows."

Irving Joyner, law professor at North Carolina Central University's School of Law in Durham, and chair of the N.C. NAACP's Legal Redress Committee, laments that President Obama's historic governance has come to an end.

"At the same time, I am filled with pride that President Obama was able to make a significant contribution to the goodness of the United States as its president," Professor Joyner said. "His accomplishments, which are too numerous to list here, were achieved in the face of the most concentrated and race-based efforts by the Republican Party political leadership that

was determined that he would not succeed. In spite of everything that they threw at him, he made America great and moved this country to another level and political reality. At the end of the day, he made us proud."

State Sen. Paul Lowe (D-Forsyth) agrees.

"Basically I think President Obama was good, there's no question about that," Sen. Lowe told *The Chronicle* Monday, adding that Obama was also good for North Carolina. "I think he did some good things with the economy, I think the [bank] bailout was good, he got [Osama bin Laden]. [But] more translation [last] election season could have been done to talk about that with Joe Blow regular America. Those things could have been talked about. Now we have people saying, 'Get rid of Obamacare...' and that's why [they] voted for Trump, [but will they also say] that Affordable Care Act, you can't beat it, it's great stuff." "I mean this is what we're getting!"

"That means somewhere in translation, something was lost," Sen. Lowe concludes, agreeing that Republicans certainly worked hard to successfully corrupt the message of how the Affordable Care Act (ACA) could help millions of Americans in need of health care. Lowe laments that Gov. Pat McCrory would not support

Medicaid expansion when he was in office, though Gov. Roy Cooper does now. Thousands of North Carolinians did sign up for the ACA, however.

When it comes to predicting what the future holds in a Trump Administration, Rep. Terry was resolute.

"Puppetry comes to mind as the transfer of power approaches," Terry said. "We must do our job as good citizens and remain hopeful and vigilant because the things that mattered to a strong America still do matter: the economy, climate change/environment/the planet; criminal justice system and affordable health care ... ad infinitum. Remember this — America is a democracy and not an authoritarian government. As such peaceful dissent and voting by the people can change anything, even purveyors of the seven deadly sins."

"Along the way to President Obama's many successes and contributions, a new and more strident campaign of racism has developed," Joyner said. "This development produced, in large part, the surprising election of Donald Trump as the incoming president who was voted into office by a decided minority of voters."

"As a result of the Trump brand and caustic style of campaigning, his election has done much to divide America and to create a heightened fear for the sur-

vival of the democracy to which we are entitled. Following his election, Trump now has the lowest approval rating of any president in U.S. history. The next four years promise to be very challenging and stressful for African-Americans, poor people and other racial minorities.

"In response, we need to be vigilant, organized, politically educated and committed to elevating the fight to secure and protect the democracy," said Joyner, "which we are entitled to in this country."

Sen. Lowe, who is also a minister, admitted that a special prayer maybe in order as Donald Trump takes over. He notes how a President Trump "lashes out" on Twitter at those he perceives to be enemies, and is assembling an administration that apparently cares little for the poor.

"You wonder, with the Trump election, is this some kind of backlash to the Obama presidency," Lowe asked rhetorically, noting how the Obama years brought North Carolinians of all backgrounds together, even though their efforts to elect Hillary Clinton fell short last year.

"In terms of President-elect Trump, the jury is still out," Sen. Lowe continued. "For some of my Republican colleagues, the election of Trump might be the mandate for some of the far-right, extreme conservative activity that we see happening in the N.C. General Assembly."

## Ellison

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Ellison announced on Monday away from the prayer breakfast that he will be one of the lawmakers who will not attend.

On Monday at the breakfast, he talked about how despite racism in the United States, there are ways to overcome. He said in the new movement, people have to return to the grassroots of the Civil Rights Movement, support each other and form lasting relationships; promote inclusive action and reject racial division, such as when working for common causes, like social justice regarding wages; tell stories about health care issues to encourage each other and work toward

action; ask workers to help fund campaigns, not just the people with money; and "Most of all what we've got to do: We've got to reorient our thinking back toward love."

He said that government "tells us that 'there's not enough, we'd like to help you, but there's not enough, and because there's not enough, we're looking out for us, not you.' They argue scarcity, but we have to argue abundance. We have to argue there is enough."

"If we will organize, if we will unify ... to rely on the small donors to fuel our campaigns so our accountability will run to the small donor, not just the big guy, but to the small one then that should lead to success."

Ellison spoke about how North Carolina's Moral Monday protests have been effective.

"You should take heart, because John Lewis got hit on the head, but John Lewis got up again," he said.

Ellison told audience members they should "thank God almighty that you have been born to a moment when you have been put to the test. And you can either fail the test or you can step up and pass the test, and to win the test all you got to do is be brave and have faith."

Ellison referenced a chant that Mayor Pro Tempore Vivian Burke had the audience recite: "America, America, my country. We move forward. We don't step back."

She introduced elected officials at the breakfast.

Ellison's younger brother, attorney Eric Ellison, introduced him. Eric Ellison is president of the Forsyth County Democratic Party.

Mayor Allen Joiner brought greetings to the crowd.

The Rev. Dr. Lamonte Williams, president of the Ministers' Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity, gave a charge to the community.

Ernie Pitt, publisher emeritus of *The Chronicle*, Winston-Salem's oldest continually published weekly, earlier welcomed the audience and thanked readers and sponsors.

He announced the formation of the Ernie Pitt Scholarship Foundation,



Photo by Timothy Ramsey  
**Winston-Salem attorney Eric Ellison introduces his brother, Keith Ellison, as the keynote speaker during the prayer breakfast.**

which will partly be connected to the Department of Communication and Media Studies at Winston-Salem State University.

More details about the Prayer Breakfast can be found in the MLK Jr. Day insert in today's *Chronicle*.

## Street

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### Sean Whitley (at right)

"I don't follow politics too much because I feel like all politicians are corrupt, so once I saw that he won, I felt like it really didn't matter anymore. Everybody thought Hillary would win, but when she didn't, that really showed me the mentality of this country."



### Joy Wall

"Honestly, I don't have any thoughts right now. My main concern is finishing school. I am concerned about what he may do to HBCUs (historically black colleges and universities), but right now I'm just worried about graduating."

### Kalin Stevens (Right)

"I'm slightly optimistic. I don't think he is a real representation of the people, so it will be interesting to see if he can bring people together."



### Darnella Moore

"At times like this all you can do is pray."



### Bryanna Tanner

"I'm not really into politics, but honestly, I feel like we're doomed. I just watched a movie the other day, 'The Purge,' and I feel like with Trump as president, that could be a reality."



### George Mathis

"I feel like things will be a lot more honest. I'm not a negative person so I'm not going to say Trump is going to run everything in the ground because one person can't control the government."



### Zabadria Clark

"Honestly I believe at this moment it's all in God hands. At first I was heartbroken, but things will turn around."

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