

## LOCAL

# This man is addressing diversity head-on to help Louisville's tourism industry change

**Andre Toran** Louisville Courier Journal

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***Editor's note:** As we flip the calendar to 2021, The Courier Journal put together a list of 12 notable individuals who are committed to the advancement of Louisville. They include social justice advocates, business leaders, coaches, health care professionals, restaurateurs, arts leaders and more.*

*This is one in a series of 12 people who are doing their best to help make Louisville an even better city in the new year.*

Cleo Battle stood on the corner of West Jefferson and Fourth streets in front of the Louisville Visitors Center downtown smiling.

Cars and trucks halted at the stoplight to his right. The hum of the motors and wheeze of air releasing from exhaust pipes made his smile last a little bit longer.

“It’s good to see traffic again,” he said.

An influx in traffic in downtown Louisville is a welcome sight for Battle. As the chief operating officer of Louisville Tourism, he's watched the normally vibrant downtown turn into a deserted wasteland over the past nine months.

As the hospitality industry has been ransacked by the COVID-19 pandemic and people avoided the downtown business corridor due to negative stigmas associated with social justice protests throughout the city, Battle will play a vital role in helping his industry not only return to normalcy in 2021 but grow and change.

Battle doesn't just want normalcy, he wants evolution. In the new year, he will roll out a handful of diversity initiatives to help evaluate and address racial and minority disparities in both his organization and across Louisville's hospitality industry.

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But a racial reckoning is not the only change Battle knows must be addressed in 2021. There are other issues plaguing the hospitality industry amid the pandemic — travel and visitation have all but run dry, leading to salary cuts and furloughs at his own company, and a revenue budget that has taken a nosedive.

“We’re paralyzed,” said Louisville Tourism CEO and President Karen Williams. But when Williams and her team look toward a post-pandemic world, the general expectation is the industry will come back strong.

Reinventing Louisville's tourism industry in 2021 will focus on getting money — and travelers — back, but also making sure the industry itself is inclusive and equitable both internally and externally.

And Battle is the man for the job.

Al Hutchinson, president and CEO of Visit Baltimore and a friend of Battle's for 25 years, said the industry and country are at "a cross-section with the pandemic and social justice," and are in need of leaders to navigate this terrain.

With Battle's 30-plus years of hospitality experience and perspective, Hutchinson believes "a person like Cleo, being an African American leader in travel and tourism, can use that experience to help a city like Louisville pivot post-COVID.”

**More:** Does Kentucky's breathtaking Red River Gorge need a \$350-a-night 'destination resort?'

That pivot will be hinged on a four-pronged attack, Battle said: creating better relationships with the local Black community; marketing Kentucky’s Black heritage experience to increase leisure visitation; bettering the hospitality industry; and diversifying the makeup of his own organization.

Both the Kentucky Department of Tourism and Louisville Tourism have committed to increasing the promotion of Kentucky Black history to potential visitors, Battle said — highlighting the legacy of African American jockeys in Kentucky's storied horse racing industry and the story of Black people in the bourbon industry.

To jump-start the initiative, Louisville Tourism in June created the Black Tourism Advisory Council. Its purpose is to help Louisville Tourism curate and properly tell stories of Black Louisville using Battle’s four diversity objectives.

The council has met every month since July and is composed of individuals such as Eric King, director of marketing and communication at TARC; Hannah Drake, local activist, author and poet; Tawana Bain, New Age Communications CEO; leaders from local churches; and representatives from the Kentucky Derby Museum.

With guidance from Battle and the council, Louisville Tourism will launch outreach programming aimed at attracting more Black “leisure visitors” to the city in the new year. Of the 16.4 million visitors who travel to Louisville annually — in a year not marred by a pandemic — Black leisure visitors only make up about 11% of that number on average.

Additional programming will focus on sparking an industrywide conversation about race and the interactions between the tourism industry and people of color.

Battle hopes these initiatives will answer questions such as: *When Business X comes to town, why aren't they doing business with minority-owned businesses? Or when a family visits, how do we make sure they get the quintessential African American experience?*

“We should want our professional environment, our educational environment, to be environments where people have equal opportunity and equal access,” Battle said. “And I think we are still challenged by that.”

**More:** Louisville Urban League president says 2021 will be a chance at 'reconstruction'

Change starts from within the industry itself, he says. Battle is one of “maybe 10 or 15” African American individuals with his title in the hospitality industry, he says. And the number of CEOs and presidents running tourism organizations nationwide is even less.

If his organization and industry are to effectively coach others on how to break the cycle of systemic failures in the hospitality industry, their own staff's diversity must be addressed.

Louisville Tourism asked the Urban League to recommend an outside firm to conduct a company diversity audit to examine its hiring practices, marketing material and business partnerships.

Louisville Tourism in July led its first Diversity, Equity & Inclusion training for the local hospitality industry, which 400 people attended virtually. A second was conducted in October, and there will be more to come as Battle's initiative develops in 2021.

“Are you going to eradicate racism? No,” Battle said. But he does believe systematic change is accomplishable. “If you ask my African American professional friends, they'll say, ‘I want a seat at the table. I don't want to take anyone else's seat, I just want a seat.’”

As Battle sat on a downtown bench just outside of the Louisville Visitors Center, he saw few people walking the streets. If it was a normal year, there would be people bustling up and down Fourth Street, with activity from the Kentucky International Convention Center to the Broadway intersection.

This year has been hard, but he doesn't let the stark reality the pandemic has brought to his industry sour his mood. When he looks around, he sees innovation and strategy. He sees space for change.

"I've been in this industry 35 years," he said. "We have to innovate. We have to move forward. ... The world's changed, and we've got to change with it."

*Contact Andre Toran at [atoran@gannett.com](mailto:atoran@gannett.com) or follow on Twitter @andretoran.*

## Biography

**Name:** Cleo Battle

**Position:** Louisville Tourism chief operating officer

**Age:** 56

**Hometown:** Denver

**What Battle says about 2021:** "We have done a really good job in Louisville establishing our brand nationally. Now, as you come out of COVID and as you deal with social justice, you have the reestablish your brand. You have to give people, again, a reason as to why they should visit."

### 3 reasons to watch Cleo Battle in 2021:

He'll lead an effort to roll out new diversity initiatives in the hospitality industry, which includes the Black Tourism Advisory Council and telling Black stories.

He expects to roll back outdated and racially biased approaches to hiring and staffing within the hospitality industry with diversity trainings and audits.

His team will focus on growing Black tourist visitation to Louisville.