

Episode 62: Meet Dr. Alexander

After a summer of protests surrounding issues of police brutality and civil rights, the University of Minnesota is starting off the school year by bringing in an expert to review safety and equity on campus and in the UMPD. In this episode, we interviewed Dr. Cedric L. Alexander, the civic leader, trained clinical psychologist and former police chief appointed to conduct the assessment.

Megan Germnudson and Ava Kian

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MEGAN PALMER: Hey, y'all, and welcome back to "In The Know," the podcast where we dive into what is happening on the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities campus. Since we last left you in June, a lot has happened in Minneapolis and around the country. Students are back on campus for fall semester, and the coronavirus pandemic continues to ravage the United States. The sky is hazy from the smoke of the West Coast wildfires, and George Floyd square on East 38th & Chicago is still held by local organizers, as calls for racial justice continue across the Twin Cities and the nation.

AMBI: PROTEST NOISE FROM SUMMER PROTESTS

PALMER: This is going to be a semester unlike any other, and we will be here to help document and give context to everything that happens. To kick off the 2020-2021 school year, our reporters spoke with Dr. Cedric L. Alexander, an appointee by President Gabel who will reassess what public safety should look like on the U's campus. Here's Megan Germundson and Ava Kian with the latest.

INTRO MUSIC



MEGAN GERMUNDSON: Hi everyone, welcome back to another school year. I'm Megan Germundson, a senior at the University and returning reporter.

AVA KIAN: I'm Ava Kian, a new reporter at the Daily. This season, I'm excited to discover meaningful stories on campus and amplify voices that are often marginalized by the media. – You're listening to "In the Know," a podcast by the Minnesota Daily.

GERMUNDSON: In response to the unrest following George Floyd's killing, the University of Minnesota announced some changes to campus status quo, like limiting their relationship with the Minneapolis Police Department after facing pressure from student groups. And in late August students, staff and faculty learned of the University's plan to assess public safety on campus.

AMBI: INCOMING EMAIL

KIAN: In an email, President Gabel announced the appointment of Dr. Cedric L. Alexander to conduct a review of the University and the UMPD. Dr. Alexander is a former police chief, trained clinical psychologist and has taken on the role of a consultant on policing. Some of the areas he is expected to review include: policing practices, University policies, social justice issues and issues surrounding security and safety on campus.

GERMUNDSON: We reached out to several student groups to get their perspective at the outset of this process, and the Students for a Democratic Society group on campus provided us with a statement. Other groups declined to offer a comment.

KIAN: In their statement, the SDS said they find President Gabel's review initiative deficient. And instead called for a community elected "Campus Community Police Accountability Council" composed of students, faculty, staff and community members. This council, they say, would conduct independent officer reviews and have significant influence on the department. The SDS also requested a meeting with Dr. Alexander to discuss their demands.

MEGAN: So, in today's episode, we talk to Dr. Alexander via Zoom to learn more about who he is and what we can expect from his review.

AMBI: ZOOM RING

DR. CEDRIC L. ALEXANDER: What's up, what's up?

GERMUNDSON: Thank you so much for doing this and making the time.

DR. ALEXANDER: So, you're like the editor-in-chief?

GERMUNDSON: No. Not even close unfortunately. (Laughing.)

DR. ALEXANDER: (Laughing.) But anyway, y'all go ask whatever you want to ask. Let's rock 'n' roll.

KIAN: Dr. Alexander's career began as a police officer – in 1977.

DR. ALEXANDER: So, I started in Tallahassee, went to Orlando, subsequently ended up in Miami in early '80s and stayed there until the very early '90s, and decided to get out of policing after about 15 years or so.

GERMUNDSON: After leaving the police force, he went back to school full time, earning a doctorate in clinical psychology at Wright State University. And at the University of Rochester Medical Center, Dr. Alexander completed a postdoc and ended up as faculty in the Psychiatry Department and working as a staff psychologist.

DR. ALEXANDER: Seeing families primarily, I did a lot of family work, and I did a lot of work with police officers and firefighters as well.

AVA: In that role, he dealt with clinical interventions for officers who had experienced traumatic incidents.

DR. ALEXANDER: So, such as a shooting or saw something really gruesome, it was mandatory that they saw a psychologist. And primarily me, because of my background as a police officer. So, I did that for about five years. The mayor and I along the way became friends and about 2002, Rochester Police Department. Rochester – does that sound familiar right now?

GERMUNDSON: Here, the emphasis on Rochester refers to the police killing of Daniel Prude, a Black man who died of suffocation after Rochester police officers handcuffed him, put a hood over his head and knelt on his back in March of this year.

Back in 2002, Rochester Police Department brought on Dr. Alexander as a deputy chief due to his career expertise, academic background and relationships he'd established in the city.

AMBI (FADE BACK UP AND OUT) (PHONE RINGING)

DR. ALEXANDER: Hey Bill, can I hit you back in 10? I'm doing a Zoom.

But anyway, in fact that was the mayor that hired me back in 2002 to come in as a deputy chief and because of my background and they were having some of the same problems as you're having that we're seeing today, but it just was not as pronounced. You know, we didn't have social media and video cameras all over the place and all that kind of stuff.

So, long story short, what I said to the mayor is that I need to look around the country and see if there's some mental health training that police officers can receive in order to reduce the likelihood of some of those negative interactions that either turn deadly or someone ends up seriously hurt.

KIAN: Dr. Alexander eventually became the Chief of Police in Rochester, before leaving to take on other roles including heading up the TSA at the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport and serving as Police Chief in DeKalb County Georgia, a large suburb of Atlanta.

GERMUNDSON: In 2015, he was also member of President Obama's Task Force On 21st Century Policing, which culminated with a lengthy report that included recommendations for policing practices that build public trust, and encouraged police use of technology like body cameras.

KIAN: And now...

DR. ALEXANDER: I've been doing training around here, Northwest Florida, with a couple of police departments, implicit and explicit bias training. And of course, I consult with a lot of chiefs, several mayors across the country, you know, about a variety of things. Whenever they call me.

KIAN: Throughout his consulting, he emphasized the most important piece is connecting with people and engaging the community.

DR. ALEXANDER: But one thing I pride myself on is being fair. Yes, having been a police officer in the profession, but I pride myself on that being fair because number one, it's expected. But even equally as important, if not more important, being a person of color myself, being a Black man in America. So, I feel people's pain. I feel I know what they're talking about. I know the discrepancies and the systemic racism that still goes on in America, we cannot deny it. We got to confront it. And until we confront it, we can't change anything.

George Floyd put us in a very different place. And so, my work primarily is to help build relationships and being able to do it from a variety of positions: having been a faculty member at a major institution, having been a police executive and administrator, having been trained as a psychologist, being a Black man in America, there's a combination of all of it. So that's kind of where I am.

GERMUNDSON: In his new role at the University, he says he plans to meet with a variety of groups and organizations on campus.

DR. ALEXANDER: So, primarily what they have asked me to do is to come in and meet with students, with faculty and meet with you guys. And meet with the police department. And really get an assessment of those relationships. I'm gonna tell you what's important to me: I want to hear from the student groups and I know you got a ton of them. And I'm probably going to get to many of them, because I want to hear from them in terms of what has been their experience and observations around policing or public safety.

What are these varieties of different organizations, how do they see and feel and experience these things? Because, as you will know, people have a lot of anger. And abundant in that anger is a lot of hurt, right?

So, we want to get to some of that. And I want to collect that information. I want to talk to the chief. I want to talk to his personnel. I want to see how they engage with students around campus, I must spend time with him. But I must spend a lot of time in that University community via Zoom, or periodically when I'm able to get on the ground, which I'm hoping to be able to get home around and next two to three weeks, just so I can kind of meet everybody in person social business in mass, all that stuff. Right.

GERMUNDSON: As far as exactly how he's planning to meet with those different groups – he said for now the meetings will have to take place via Zoom.

DR. ALEXANDER: I don't want to be seen as just some guy consultant coming in from outside telling us how we should do and blah blah blah. For me to be really effective and to really get to know people, I need to meet you first before we can even get into all that

Being humanistic with people and giving people an opportunity to get to know me and given myself an opportunity to get to know them.

GERMUNDSON: I'm wondering what – you know, because there's some justice reform advocates who are sort of skeptical of someone who's coming in from the police side of things. The police former police officer perspective. I'm just wondering what you would have to say to people who are feeling uncomfortable with that.

DR. ALEXANDER: I understand. But I'm not just police. I'm police, I'm a psychologist, I'm a person who believes in human rights and civil rights. And I'm also a person of color who lives the things that people are protesting about. I have to live that every day. Because I live in this skin. So, I am more than just this one kind of dimensional, I am multi-dimensional, and all of those things play a significant role in terms of how I assess, how I view the world, our experiences and how I'm able to help move the University and its public safety and its relationships forward.

KIAN: Dr. Alexander said that his recommendations and review could lay the basis for new policies and other long-term changes at the University.

DR. ALEXANDER: We may have the opportunity to rewrite policies around terms of how we interact with students, we may have the opportunity to make changes that are going to be learned long-term, and that's often done through policy review, policy changes. It's – we may have done it this way, but we're going to do it this way. Just like chokeholds. You change the policy around that. If the policy is not adhered to, then there's consequences to that.

And it becomes part of the culture, but whatever we do we want to make sure we build it into the culture so that it doesn't when I leave when the President leaves it goes away, but it's something that is written inside a policy. That will make a cultural change. Which is going to be hugely important going forward.

GERMUNDSON: As far as working with UMPD, he says he doesn't see any challenges arising as they work together.

DR. ALEXANDER: No, I don't. I've communicated with the chief, and he's aware of all of this, and he's committed to be open and be very much part of the process, you know, as we move forward, learning how to do things better. And I don't think you can ask any more than that. But at the end of the day, what we say is what we do. Right?

GERMUNDSON: And while Dr. Alexander doesn't anticipate any challenges as he prepares to assess the UMPD. This review contrasts with student protests over the summer that called for more direct action with UMPD's resources and presence on campus.

DR. ALEXANDER: And this is where we are and this is where we start from.

So, there's a lot of work that has to be done. And it's going to take time. And I appreciate, to be honest with you, the courageousness of those young people, your friends, your colleagues, your classmates who stood up for justice. And saying that this is wrong, it is not acceptable, because there's nothing wrong with change. There's nothing wrong with reform. We're moving into the 21st Century. Nothing stays the same forever. And there's always better ways to do things, but we all have to be part of that process. Where it benefits not just one person or one group of people, but it has benefits for everybody that's involved, regardless of who you are. Right. So, I applaud the students on that campus but taking a position for standing up for justice.

KIAN: The entire review process, he says, could take anywhere from three to four months. He also said that the University has provided him with sufficient resources but we are unsure exactly how much has been allocated for his assessment.

GERMUNDSON: We look forward to being able to discuss his findings when the review is done. However, it remains unclear as to whether or not the report will be publicly available when complete.

KIAN: We want to hear from you, if you have any concerns or questions as this review process begins, send us your thoughts. Send us an email at InTheKnow@mndaily.com with your comments.

GERMUNDSON: Your comments can help us build on this story so that we can continue to learn more about this review and keep you up to date.

FADE UP & UNDER OUTRO MUSIC

PALMER: In other University of Minnesota news, first-year students are starting to move into residence halls this week as campus shifts into step one of the Maroon & Gold Sunrise Plan. Gopher athletics announced last week that they would be cutting the men's tennis, men's gymnastics and men's track and field teams for financial and Title IX sustainability reasons. And the newly elected Jamal Osman is settling into his Ward 6 city council seat, a seat that's been vacant since March when Abdi Warsame left to head the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority.

We'll see you next week.