

Black Leadership ROUNDTABLE



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Vice President of
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Founder/CEO,
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Leonie Mattison

President of
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Dexter Nunnery

Founder/Director,
Oxnard Project 50



Erica Stewart

Mayor of San Luis Obispo



Julius Sokenu

President of
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The Q&A was conducted by Editor Henry Dubroff and edited by Co-Managing Editor Jorge Mercado. The cover illustration and layout was produced by Art Director/Designer Courtney Abercrombie. For additional comments, email hdubroff@pacbiztimes.com.

The Los Angeles Fires: A test of resilience

Editor's note: In recognition of Black History Month, the Business Times is presenting our annual Black Leadership Roundtable, a Q&A discussion with a panel of regional leaders. Our focus for 2025 is on the Eaton Fire which devastated the historically Black community of Altadena, and its broader implications. Our discussion was conducted via email with Editor Henry Dubroff and the answers have been lightly edited. Here are our panelists:

Charla Batey, California Public Relations Manager for Cox Communications.

Jim Ely, Regional Executive for US Bankcorp Investments

Kim Hunter, Founder/CEO, LaGrant Communications

Tammy Sims Johnson, Vice President for Philanthropic Services, Santa Barbara Foundation

Leonie Mattison, President Pacifica Graduate Institute

Dexter Nunnery, Founder/Director of the Oxnard Project 50

Julius Sokenu, President of Moorpark College

Erica Stewart, Mayor of San Luis Obispo

Question 1: The recent fires in LA County devastated Altadena, one of the largest historically Black communities in SoCal. What can the Central Coast do to help?

Hunter: Identify established, credible organizations that have ties to Altadena and Pasadena and know the community well such as Brotherhood Crusade Wildfire Fund to Aid Altadena Residents (brotherhoodcrusade.org). I have made a personal donation and each of my three enterprises matched dollar-for-dollar. This fund will go directly to providing monetary relief and recovery efforts, including housing, food, transportation, clean water, medicine, technology, and other key necessities. Support organizations know that Altadena has a long history of being a sanctuary for Black families, offering opportunities for homeownership and community building. Today, 58% of the community identifies as people of color, with over 18% being Black, according to Census data. The real tragedy is the potential of a legacy at risk of building generational wealth.

Batey: With the fires in Los Angeles County devastating

Altadena, the Central Coast business and residential communities will need to be prepared to welcome some of our southern neighbors both physically and remotely. Members of Altadena, some of whom have lived there for multiple generations may be looking to relocate so if homeowners and landlords are looking to sell their residences or fill vacancies, I hope that they will strongly consider members of these communities, not discriminate, or price gouge. New faces, with new talents, cultures, and their families will bring more richness both figurately and economically to the amazing region that is Santa Barbara County. Further, from a remote standpoint, some job seekers or business consultants and owners may be looking to expand their searches or services to the Santa Barbara region, and the community can also welcome them with open virtual arms. Thanks to managed cloud and cybersecurity services, including Cox Business, this is seamless in 2025.

Sims Johnson: The Central Coast is no stranger to

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wildfires and subsequent heavy rains that cause equally devastating mudslides and debris flow. For our neighbors to the south who recently experienced the tragic Palisades and Eaton fires, we understand what you are going through. The property loss is compounded by the loss of life and a close-knit community, like Altadena's historic Black community. At the Santa Barbara Foundation, we are in the business of connecting donors to the causes they care about, and our donors have contributed to an array of organizations responding to the relief efforts. To learn more, please visit: Community Disaster Relief — Santa Barbara Foundation.

Ely: It takes a village, community or sometimes a simple individual to help by providing a supporting hand. Far too often, underserved communities don't have the luxury of advice and direction when tragic life events take place. Planning for future "what ifs" can sometimes — understandably — take a back seat to the day-to-day challenges of juggling work, kids, paying bills, and so on. Unfortunately, not having a plan for major events can ultimately destroy wealth and the progress individuals and communities are making to build it. Who's going to be there to provide advice when all that you've known for generations may be lost overnight? This is the reality for many in my community of Altadena. I am hopeful that the Central Coast community will provide that supporting hand.

Nunnery: Organizations can send or assign a Central Coast team member so that we can get connected to the Altadena community and learn about short- and long-term issues.

Sokenu: The loss from the recent fire in Altadena is devastating. It is certainly devastating to the Black people who have lived and thrived in that community despite inequities in our system that may have prevented them from thriving elsewhere in Southern California. Altadena, with its vibrant African American small businesses and proactive community-based organizations, needs the Central Coast to invest in the rebuilding of infrastructure, collaborations between our community-based organizations, and leveraging networks of philanthropic foundations and banking. Altadena needs the rebuilding process to be fast-tracked, and we can all elevate the sense of urgency months from now when it is no longer front-page news. Culturally competent mental health and legal counselors can answer the call of our neighbors in Altadena. We recognize that Altadena's loss is the loss of the larger community of Southern California.

Stewart: The wildfires in Altadena highlight the need for collective action. The Central Coast can play a vital role in supporting recovery efforts. It was inspiring to see individuals and organizations immediately take action, collecting food, clothing, and donations to provide relief — a testament to the strength and compassion of our communities. We can support Altadena through rebuilding efforts, advocating for policies that protect displaced homeowners and renters, and ensuring community voices shape recovery plans and preserve cultural history. Investing in Altadena's future means embedding Black history in the rebuilding process, ensuring it remains a safe, welcoming, and thriving community for generations to come.

Mattison: The Los Angeles fires in a predominantly Black community laid bare three systemic fractures: emergency response failures, infrastructure and financial inequities, and climate-driven displacement. Yet beyond the charred remains of homes lies a wound far older than this fire — the relentless erasure of Black presence, the severing of ancestral ties, and the unspoken, un-grieved losses of displacement that have reshaped history itself. From a depth psychological perspective, we must ask: Will Black families reclaim their future, or will their recovery be dictated by those who have never carried the weight of this history? Will rebuilding honor the soul of this community, or will it be rewritten or priced beyond reach? Will Black voices shape the decisions guiding their return, or will time quietly erase them, as it has so many before? These are not just questions —

they are reckonings. To rebuild without addressing displacement's psychic and cultural ruptures is to lay foundations atop forgotten graves. At Pacifica Graduate Institute, our work in depth psychology reveals these hidden fractures, ensuring recovery is not merely an economic process but a restoration of people and place. Through the Pacifica Promise Scholarship Program and Extension and International Studies, we are cultivating mental health practitioners deeply embedded in the communities they serve — healers who understand that before disaster strikes, trust must already be present. To heal is to reclaim what was always meant to endure. And to achieve that, we must reclaim, restore, and reaffirm the right to remain.

For centuries, Black communities have turned adversity into strength, survival into progress, and hardship into action. From resisting oppression to rebuilding after displacement, resilience has defined our history.

Erica Stewart
Mayor of San Luis Obispo

Question 2: What lessons can we learn about resiliency?

Sokenu: Cultural enclaves are gifts to all of us despite the context in which they are often created. They provide us with a window into history, culture, creativity and resiliency. That resiliency was seen in a community of people who found a place, a geographical location, in their little corner of the world and made it their home. They made it their home amidst a world that cut them out and pushed them to the margins both geographically and socially. Some of the Black people in Altadena managed to build a good life from an economic perspective, others did not. Nonetheless, they all found a home there that is beautiful and diverse and eclectic. That resiliency is evident in the groundswell of local activism and public support and the abundant donation of funds and materials, and the concerts and spiritual events attempting to heal the grief of those who lost homes and loved ones.

Nunnery: Resiliency is an attribute that is a part of the black community DNA that will be amplified in the community of Altadena by way of visual, moral and physical support from non-community members.

Sims Johnson: I am continually amazed by the resilience of the Black community. From historic injustices and ongoing discrimination to economic uncertainty and natural disasters, like the Eaton fire in Altadena, we make a way "out of no way" to survive and rebuild. We are a resilient people because we understand the power of community and the collective voice, through policy and advocacy, to ensure that important communities like Altadena can rebuild in a way that honors their history, culture and character, and prepares them for the future. As a former Angeleno with family ties to the Altadena/Pasadena community, I have every confidence that they will rise and succeed.

Mattison: From a depth psychological perspective, symbols help us explore the unseen layers of resilience, offering meaning amid hardship. In the wake of the fires, I invite you to consider the camel and the rabbit — two powerful symbols that speak to the emotional state of the Black community's endurance, loss, and hope. The steady and unshaken camel carries immense burdens across harsh environments, its strength quiet yet unwavering. But the camel also knows

when to stop, kneel, and drink deeply because it understands that survival is not just about pressing forward but about restoring oneself for the road ahead. In times of crisis, the camel reminds us that true resilience is knowing when to pause, gather strength, and lean on others before continuing the journey. Then there's the rabbit — curious, playful, and bold. Where the camel teaches endurance, the rabbit offers something as important: the courage to move forward without knowing exactly where the path leads. It leaps despite uncertainty, navigating the unknown with instinct and adaptability. The rabbit invites us to embrace imagination, to reimagine what is possible even when all seems lost. For those affected by the fires, these symbols offer a message: Allow yourself to rest, but do not stop believing in what comes next. Carry your strength like a camel, knowing that even the most difficult landscapes can be crossed. And when the time comes, leap like the rabbit — toward possibility, renewal, and a future that has yet to be written.

Stewart: For centuries, Black communities have turned adversity into strength, survival into progress, and hardship into action. From resisting oppression to rebuilding after displacement, resilience has defined our history. When community members, businesses, and local governments unite with purpose, we create lasting change. Intentional investment in Black communities fosters stability, opportunity, and growth. Preserving our history through storytelling ensures our struggles and triumphs are never erased. By building strong networks, advocating for equitable policies, and committing to long-term solutions, we don't just recover — we rise stronger, more connected, and ready to shape a future rooted in justice, prosperity, and empowerment.

Batey: Black / African American people in this county and abroad have had to be resilient for more than decades than I want to count. I believe my parents started showing me how to be resilient from the time I was five years old, and we moved from Denver, Colorado to Whitewater, Wisconsin for my father to take an academic administration position at a university. Denver was where they met, fell in love, and lived near all their family and friends. It was a big risk and painful for my mother especially who was the only adult child, with aging parents, two young children and her own career to rebuild in a new state. I share this story in honor of my father Charles Frank Batey, Jr, an esteemed diversity, equity and inclusion and human resources college administrator, who passed away at the age of 84 on the first day of Black History Month this year.

Hunter: Resiliency is synonymous with the Black culture and community. Historically, Blacks have undergone many challenges over time such as slavery, redlining, underemployment, and unemployment, among others. This devastation to Altadena will impact Blacks for years, possibly decades to come. What I like about the Brotherhood Crusade Wildfire Fund is it will remain open through 2026. It's not a one-and-done. This speaks to residency.

Ely: Our community is defined by its continuous display of resiliency. Adaptability in the face of unimaginable circumstances has allowed so many to excel in providing solutions to the world's most difficult problems.

Question 3: How can we rebuild communities without amplifying economic inequality?

Sims Johnson: It is expensive to live in Southern California. Across this beautiful region, the American Dream of homeownership is out of reach for most residents and exorbitant rents continue to place a heavy burden on working families struggling to put food on the table or pay for medical bills and childcare. If tragedy strikes, like the recent fires, then the option to rebuild or to rent in the community you love is more and more out of reach. It will take intentionality from both the public and private sectors to help communities like Altadena rebuild in a way that maintains their rich culture and enables residents across all income levels to go back home.

Batey: We can rebuild communities without amplifying

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economic inequality by encouraging home sellers and landlords to consider buyers and renters with multi-generation occupants and sources of income. This is increasingly common across the country with the ever-increasing cost of real estate or even rent in desirable areas like Santa Barbara. As such, families are more regularly living together so that my generation, “The Sandwich Generation” can care for both our children and aging parents. And often, we are making healthy salaries that just can’t keep up with the inflation in the housing market. And our parents are often living their best retirement lives off pensions, retirement plans, social security healthy investments and proceeds from the sales of their homes if they owned at one point. Families want to remain close, and this is a good thing for the local community and its economy, including the healthcare industry.

Nunnery: By amplifying consistent genuine support.

Mattison: History has shown that every movement toward social progress meets resistance — a struggle between transformation and those who fear its implications. The current pushback against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts at the federal level reflects a deeper truth: a collective psyche resisting accountability. Just as the unconscious rejects painful truths, society resists confronting the systemic foundations of inequality. But progress requires more than policy shifts—it demands an honest reckoning with history. Without this, rebuilding becomes yet another tool of erasure. From a depth psychological perspective, rebuilding must be an intentional act of reclaiming history, power, and economic justice. Recovery efforts have too often served as instruments of displacement, reinforcing exclusion rather than addressing its roots. Breaking this cycle requires centering Black agency and ensuring that those who built these communities have the power to shape their future. Rebuild-

ing is not an act of charity; it is an act of justice. It must build economic power, protect cultural identity, and acknowledge the psychological toll of generational displacement.

“What is the point of having material things if you do not share them with those who may need them most? Do what you can.”

*Kim Hunter
Founder/CEO, LaGrant Communications*

Sokenu: The rebuilding of this community is about understanding the beauty in diversity on every level. Any effort to rebuild can’t just be about selling Altadena to the highest bidder. It has to be about preserving the culture of a people who are incredibly diverse and creative and resilient. Any support from the business community should be about the preservation and amplification of the voices of the people who are there on the ground and who have been there for decades. It is incumbent upon businesses to talk with those people and understand their vision of their community. It is essential that the people hold the history and the future. We cannot allow an important part of Southern Californian–African American — history to be buried in the ashes.

Ely: The reality of economic inequality is overcome by continuing the support of wealth-building across communities. It is critical to provide access to financial education and programs that provide opportunities to support building, managing, protecting, and transferring wealth. These op-

portunities are critical for economic growth and necessary in closing the economic wealth gaps that exist today.

Hunter: Typically with disasters like the fires in Altadena, the very wealthy can rebuild and recover quickly. Historically, Altadena has been the enclave for African American families. These fires have disrupted the middle class, displacing residents and damaging decades of cultural and social development. The fires have been catastrophic to a community that has worked hard to preserve its identity and legacy. Many of us on the Central Coast and beyond can make a difference without being wealthy. You can reach out to members of the community to offer gift cards for food, gas, pharmacy, restaurants, and more. A phone call, ask them if they need anything, be an active listener, offer one of your bedrooms, your couch... It’s the small things that sometimes make the difference. Given Santa Barbara is my secondary residence, I have made my home available to those who need a place to stay. What is the point of having material things if you do not share them with those who may need them most? Do what you can.

Stewart: Equitable rebuilding must be intentional. We must ensure that Black homeowners, businesses, and workers are prioritized, not pushed out. Community land trusts and other models that prevent predatory development are great options for economic equity. It also means investing in Black-led organizations and contractors to ensure that rebuilding efforts benefit those who have lived and worked in these communities for generations. Ensuring equity is an ongoing evolution — governments and service organizations must take action now, not later, to implement policies that protect Black generational wealth. Rebuilding is about more than structures; it’s about sustaining and uplifting the people who make a community home.



SANTA BARBARA FOUNDATION

Tammy Sims Johnson
Vice President,
Philanthropic Services
Santa Barbara Foundation

“Thank you, Tammy, for your leadership and vision. We are inspired by your passion for supporting Santa Barbara County.”

Learn more about Santa Barbara Foundation, visit SBFoundation.org



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