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Grand Rapids African American executive shares experiences and learnings through new book and AskOvell.com website

"The Big House: A Human-Centered and Progressive Approach to DEI and Positive Workplace Engagement"

Ovell Barbee Jr. has walked the halls of Corporate America as an African American executive of Fortune 500 companies and two renowned health systems. As a passionate advocate for diversity, equity and inclusion, he has used his voice to challenge the status quo on behalf of others, driving cultural change to address systemic and unconscious barriers and bias.

Now he's using his voice again to share his real-life experiences and lessons learned through a new book titled "The Big House: A Human-Centered and Progressive Approach to DEI and Positive Workplace Engagement."

And through a corresponding website, <https://www.askovell.com/>, he's offering advice and answers to personal questions on human resources, DEI and leadership.

"My book is designed to motivate, inspire and inform leaders on building a better, human-centered workplace," said Barbee. "I am very passionate about helping and advising others, so I am expanding my mentorship outreach with AskOvell.com. My book and website are driven by my personal goals of strengthening communities and encouraging people to advocate on behalf of others by using their voices as catalysts for change."

Barbee believes that the greatest challenge to building a diverse and inclusive workplace is silence. To create an environment where everyone can flourish, leaders and team members must learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable by having frank, unfiltered conversations on the most difficult topics, including racism and discrimination.

"By offering opportunities to get to know colleagues and their unique, individual stories, you can build trust, allowing people to thrive by bringing their whole-selves to work," said Barbee. "This boosts engagement, productivity and retention – at a time when employees have more career choices and higher expectations than ever, reshaped by the pandemic."

Barbee grew up in inner-city Grand Rapids in a single-parent family that instilled the importance of hard work and education. He began working as a newspaper carrier at age 12. He excelled academically, earning scholarships that supported him in achieving a bachelor's degree in communications and a master's in social work from the University of Michigan, then a second master's degree in human resources and labor relations from Michigan State University. He subsequently re-paid all the scholarship money he received to the organizations that supported his education, and established the "Barbee Book Club," which pays for books and supplies for four years of college for a local Grand Rapids student each year.

Barbee worked in an array of industries, including executive leadership roles at Motorola, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, General Motors/OnStar, Spectrum Health (now Corewell Health) and Indiana University Health. He is currently the owner/principal of Ovell Rome & Associates, an HR and DEI strategy firm.

Barbee has been honored as a Top 100 Chief Diversity Officer and a Top 100 Human Resources Leader by the National Diversity Council; as a Top 50 under 50 Executive by the National Black MBA Association; as a Top 100 Human Resources Professional by OnCon; and as a recipient of the City of Grand Rapids Walter Coe Public Service GIANT award.

"In eight insightful chapters, Ovell examines what matters most to today's HR leaders and lays out an astute and actionable vision for the future of HR," said Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., president and CEO of the Society for Human Resources Management, and author of the best-seller "Reset: A Leader's Guide to Work in an Age of Upheaval."

"The Big House: A Human-Centered and Progressive Approach to DEI and Positive Workplace Engagement" is available at <https://askovell.myshopify.com/products/the-big-house>

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