

Stephanie A. Hightower
Columbus Urban League President & CEO
Official Bio

Executive Summary

A passionate advocate for social justice and racial equity, Stephanie A. Hightower is an action-oriented and effective leader. Dynamic and determined as a spokesperson, she also understands and works diligently to forge collaborative, productive relationships with staff, clients, volunteers, community, and business partners. She sets and demands high standards, but, consistent with her early life as an Olympic athlete, knows that failures and mistakes provide tremendous learning opportunities.

Her heart for a better community is reflected in both her professional, volunteer, and personal life. And this authenticity and consistency makes her a formidable change agent.

Ms. Hightower's professional portfolio includes a wealth of experiences in athletics, education, and public service. Those opportunities propelled her toward the pursuit of excellence and to advocate for equality, equity, and fairness in all of her leadership roles in K-12 and higher education, government affairs, amateur athletics, and the not-for-profit human services.

Leadership Experience

Stephanie Hightower is the 8th President and CEO (and first female President and CEO) of the Columbus Urban League (CUL), the nation's seventh largest chapter of the National Urban League and Columbus' oldest and most successful urban family advocate. Since taking the helm in 2011, Ms. Hightower has transformed the organization into a more relevant and effective force in helping individuals and families overcome poverty and achieve self-sufficiency -- today's civil rights struggle -- by offering a holistic set of initiatives that better prepare individuals to transform their lives and stabilize their families.

She also responded to the challenges of a pandemic and systemic racist incidents in 2020 by catalyzing the organization into an even more potent change-agency, tapping into more than \$5 million in new funding and rapidly and effectively using those dollars to keep families in homes, businesses open and kids on track socially and academically. She and CUL emerge from these crises as an even more respected leader determined to realize the promise of the American Dream for everyone.

CUL's wrap-around family strategies and personal mentoring efforts include early learning and after-school education, workforce readiness and career coaching, ex-offender re-entry and fatherhood coaching, financial capabilities, housing advocacy and foreclosure prevention, and family stabilization. Under Ms. Hightower's leadership, CUL met and exceeded ambitious goals around four critical initiatives centered on foundational education, economic transformation, family stabilization, and organizational sustainability. Within a three year period, CUL achieved unprecedented success by ensuring nine out of ten graduates of its Head Start enter kindergarten reading or reading-ready; assisting 486 hard-to-place chronically unemployed individuals secured full-time jobs; putting nearly 600 young people to work through a summer youth employment program that provided more than \$500,000 in income for their families; and securing the philanthropic investments of the city's major business partners to complete a \$3 million community campaign.

Prior to taking the lead at the Columbus Urban League, Ms. Hightower served as Vice President for Institutional Advancement for the Columbus College Art & Design (CCAD), one of the country's premier art and design institutions. Charged with responsibility for designing, planning,

and initiating programs to increase funding, strategically brand and communicate the institution's uniqueness through reputation management, and create tactical gateways through which alumni connect with CCAD and each other, Ms. Hightower led a groundbreaking effort to reinvigorate the college's marketing, media and community relations, and philanthropic engagement. She was most notably recognized for reimagining and developing CCAD's updated brand identity and executing a comprehensive alumni relations program. Her leadership was integral in the planning and direction of the college's first comprehensive campaign, which raised \$12 million for capital improvements and endowment growth. Founded in her belief that successful fundraising is a direct result of building strong relationships, her skills in cultivation and stewardship secured 100% participation by CCAD's Board of Trustees.

Ms. Hightower also served as Special Assistant to the President for External Relations at CCAD where she was the President's strategic advocate for developing tactics to strengthen CCAD's distinctive curriculum and programs locally and regionally. Ms. Hightower identified, cultivated, and managed strategic business partnerships that increased fundraising effectiveness and revenue resources and strengthened community visibility. She also devised and implemented CCAD's legislative agenda, building collaboration with federal, state, and local policymakers and government entities.

In December 2012, Ms. Hightower was elected to a second four-year term as USA Track & Field's Board Chairman and President. During her tenure as Chairman, in 2014, USATF announced a historic 23-year partnership with NIKE. Widely reported in the media to be worth nearly \$500M, the sponsorship is believed to be the highest dollar and longest-term sponsorship in the Olympic Family. Additionally, under her leadership, the US federation won successful bids to host multiple international competitions that includes the IAAF World Championships to be held in Eugene in 2021.

Between 1977 – 1988, Ms. Hightower earned awards and recognition at the collegiate, national, and international levels as a world-class track and field athlete competing in the 100-meter hurdles. Ms. Hightower has held several American and World Records and was a member of the 1980 Olympic Team before retiring in 1988. As a student athlete at the Ohio State University, she earned Big Ten Conference, Collegiate and National Championship titles and a place in The Ohio State University's Athletic Hall of Fame. As one of America's elite athletes, she competed on over a dozen national teams representing the United States across the globe. Since her retirement, she has emerged as a top leader within USATF. Nationally she serves as the Chairperson for the Women's Committee of USA Track and Field, is a member of the Board of Directors, and served on the committee for International Relations. In 2004, Ms. Hightower served as the Women's Track and Field Team Leader for the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. Additionally, she served as Chief of the Delegation for the 2003 Outdoor World Championships in Paris, France, head Manager for the 1999 World Championship Team in Seville, Spain, and Assistant Manager for the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

Prior to her official retirement from competitive athletics, she served as the Director of Communications and Development at the Columbus Urban League -- her first role with this historic organization. During her tenure then, she guided advocacy engagement and public relations initiatives. She was also responsible for CUL's youth summer programs.

In 1989, she was appointed to an executive role with the Ohio Department of Mental Health as the Director of Communications. She was responsible for public and media relations for the state's mental health system, whose mission is to ensure quality mental health care for all Ohioans. Her communications strategies focused on building and maintaining partnerships and alliances with the department's ten inpatient treatment hospitals, fifty county and multi-county boards, and more than 400 community mental health agencies statewide.

From 1992–1994, she held a cabinet role with the Columbus Mayor’s office as the Communications/Press Secretary, handling all media relations for the Mayor and providing oversight of communication strategies for all sixteen city departments. As a Special Assistant to the Mayor from 1995–1999, she was responsible for handling an emerging sports development effort, which brought together the business community to build a new framework for sports growth in the city and a national and international presence that would attract sports teams, events, and spectators. This powerful economic development strategy led to Columbus’ historic landing of a National Hockey League (NHL) franchise team, the Columbus Blue Jackets, and the development of Nationwide Arena.

As a champion for early learning initiatives and effective schools, Ms. Hightower was a leading voice on the Mayor’s Columbus Education Commission, an appointed board of 25 volunteer community leaders devoted to more deeply understanding the state of education in Columbus and recommending ways to make it better. A direct result of this effort, Ms. Hightower continues to serve as a key advisor with the Columbus Partnership on education matters. In 2015, she was named the first chair of the Community Engagement Council and Future Ready Columbus.

Elected Office

A strong advocate for quality education, Ms. Hightower was elected to twice to the Columbus Board of Education beginning in 2000, overseeing the largest school district in the state of Ohio. Under her leadership as Board President from 2001-2005, the Board improved fiscal management and oversight of the district’s \$700 million budget and pushed for district-wide gains in academic performance. She campaigned successfully for both a \$392 million bond initiative for construction of new schools and facilities and passed a 6.96 mill permanent operating levy which provided \$62.3 million annually in revenue -- resulting in the district’s upgraded crediting rating from Standard & Poor’s and Moody Ratings Services to the highest in district history.

Among her other successful accomplishments before retiring from the Board in February 2006: a fiscally responsible 18-month contract with the Columbus Education Association, saving the district \$3.6 million; a proactive Employee Separation Plan design to help reduce personnel costs; creation of an Audit and Accountability committee, recruiting prominent business professionals to provide fiscal guidance and direction; authoring the Community Inclusion and Role of Religion in the Classroom policy; oversight of the State of Ohio Auditor’s two consecutive year findings of ‘no material weaknesses’ in the district’s financial matters; and, the search process in 2001 for a new Superintendent and in 2005 for a Treasurer/CFO and Internal Auditor.

In addition to her record of professional and athletic success, Ms. Hightower is most proud of her son, Cameron Baker, a 2013 Haverford College graduate, working in Corporate Finance.

Professional Experience and Governance

Ms. Hightower serves on more than a dozen boards and neighborhood agencies, working throughout the community and directly with families and children. She is a founding member of the Women’s Fund of Central Ohio, member of the Greater Columbus Arts Council, Columbus Museum of Art, Buckeye Ranch, Columbus AIDS Task Force, Dresden Sister City board as well as an Advisory Board member for the African American Leadership Academy and served as Vice Chair of Columbus’ Inner City Games. She has also helped guide the Columbus Foundation’s Neighborhood Partnership program, the Columbus Metropolitan Area Community Action Organization (CMAAO), Chances for Children, the Eldon Ward YMCA, Junior Achievement of Central Ohio, and Action for Children.

2017 – Present	Franklin County Community Corrections Planning Board
2017 – Present	Franklin County Criminal Justice Planning Board
2015 – Present	Future Ready Columbus, Community Engagement Council, Chair
2015 – Present	National Urban League, Association of Executives, Secretary
2013 – Present	African American Leadership Academy, Advisory Board
2013 - 2014	Columbus Education Commission
2011 – Present	US Bank, Advisory Officer
2011 – Present	Columbus Zoo, Board of Directors, Member at Large
2008- 2011	KIPP Learning Academy
2008 – 2015	USA Track & Field, Board Chairman
2008 – Present	USA Track & Field, President
2008 - Present	USA Track & Field Foundation
Present	Columbus Sports Commission, Ex Officio member
2008 – 2014	Columbus School for Girls, Board Member
2004 – 2011	Greater Columbus Arts Council
2004 – 2011	Buckeye Ranch
2003 – Present	Greater Columbus Sports Commission, Advisory Board
2002	The Women’s Fund of Central Ohio, Founding Member
1999 – 2006	Columbus Museum of Art, Trustee
1997 – 2002	Columbus Museum of Art, African American Cultural Committee, Chairperson
1995 – 2000	Columbus Foundation, Neighborhood Partnership program, Advisory Board
2000 – 2008	USA Track and Field Federation, Women’s Committee Chairperson, International Relations
1998 – 2001	Action for Children and Circle of Women, Board Member
1997 – 2000	Junior Achievement of Central Ohio, Board Member
1997 – 1999	United Way Campaign, Vision Council
1996 - 1999	Eldon Ward YMCA, Board of Directors
1998 – 1999	Columbus Metropolitan Area Community Action Organization, Trustee

Athletic Accomplishments & Appointments/Honors

2015	The Ohio State University Distinguished Service Award
2014	The Ohio State University African American Alumni Society, Jesse Owens Influential Athlete Award
2012	The Ohio State University, Legends & Legacies Award
2004	YWCA Women of Achievement Award
2004	United States Olympic Team, Athens Greece, Women’s Team Leader
2003	The Ohio State University School of Public Policy and Management, Outstanding Public Service Award
2003	Chief D’ Mission - IAAF World Championships, Paris France
1999	IAAF World Championship - Seville, Spain, Women’s Team Leader
1997	The Ohio State University Women’s Sports Hall of Fame
1996	United States Olympic Team - Atlanta, Georgia, Women’s Team Assistant Manager
1980	United States Olympic Team Member, Track & Field – 100 m hurdles

Professional Development

Committed to ongoing professional development and refining her skills, Ms. Hightower attended the Fund-Raising School through Indiana University where she refined her focus on ethical, systemic, and mission-focused fundraising. She has also participated in the Executive and Leadership Coaching Institute, and the Leadership Development Group in Columbus, Ohio.

Education

Bachelor of Arts, The Ohio State University, 1981 – Communications