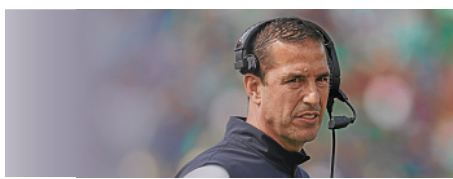


# The Journal Times

## MAKING THE CHANGE

Wisconsin football expected to hire Cincinnati's Luke Fickell as next head coach. **SPORTS, PAGE C1**



## Optimism

AG Kaul hopeful about working with Legislature. **LOCAL, PAGE B1**



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### COMMUNITY CONNECTORS



RYAN PATTERSON PHOTOS, RYAN.PATTERSON@JOURNALTIMES.COM

Jamario Farr, Sr., Horlick community connector, speaks during a group meeting Nov. 10 at Horlick. Farr is one of six Racine Unified community connectors who broadly assist students with life inside and outside of school.

## Possible victim of 'victimizer' identified

Local man is 'person of interest' in Racine-native woman's death

**JOURNAL TIMES STAFF**

**SOUTH MILWAUKEE** — The 55-year-old woman who died Nov. 22 after falling unconscious at a South Milwaukee bar Nov. 17, where she was meeting with a man accused of being a Racine-based predator who steals from women he met through online dating, has been identified as Racine-native Kim "Raina" Mikulance, WTMJ-TV (TMJ4) reported.

Mikulance was described as a regular who loved performing karaoke at Powers on 10th, 1815 10th Ave., South Milwaukee. According to her obituary, Mikulance was a certified nursing assistant who had a passion for rescuing animals, particularly cats. She had four children, eight grandchildren and one great-grandchild.



**Olson**

Please see **IDENTIFIED**, Page A3

# Changing destinies

How six Racine men became "THE REAL" to local youth

**RYAN PATTERSON**  
ryan.patterson@journaltimes.com

**RACINE** — Six men gathered earlier this year to determine principles crucial to their work.

They chose trustworthy, honest, empathetic, respectful, equitable, attentive and loving. The first letters of those words spell out the acronym THE REAL. As Racine Unified community connectors, authenticity is a key part of the around-the-clock job.

The role of community connectors defies easy description, but the men broadly assist students with life inside and outside of school. They are liaisons between students, teachers, administrators, families, law enforcement and community members who focus on gang diversion and disciplinary intervention at the middle school and high school level.

"We're the bridge of services," said Troy Collier, Mitchell K-8 school community connector.

Those services change on a



From left: Racine Unified community connectors Johnny Ford, Troy Collier, Joshua Mosley, Jamario Farr, Sr., Ishmael Perez and Galen Horton smile at Mitchell K-8 school. The men are liaisons between students, teachers, administrators, families, law enforcement and community members who want to help students grow.

daily basis.

"One day I could be a teacher. The next day I could be a counselor. The next day I could be a therapist. And then I could be a correctional officer," said Jamario Farr Sr., Horlick High School community connector.

"We all wear many hats, and I know that we all wear them all with real pride, real honor, real

dignity. We're just connecting everybody to everything that they need."

"Community connector" is less a job title and more a descriptor of the men, all Racine natives.

"This ain't nothing new," said Johnny Ford, Jerstad-Agerholm K-8 School community connector. "This is who I am."

**"I'm not foolish or prideful to think that I can change the world, but I refuse to accept that I can't help."**

**Jamario Farr Sr.**, Horlick High School community connector

### Background

The community connector program launched in the 2021-22 school year. While filling a similar niche to the roles of youth advocates, educational assistants, care workers, pastors and coaches, being a connector allows more independence and flexibility.

"Since I value the community so much, why not have a position that embodies exactly that value?" Collier said.

Jody Bloyer, RUSD chief of schools, wanted to decrease gang activity and issues in classrooms by empowering the people best situated to do so. Bloyer and the connectors spoke often before the 2021-22 school year about the roles. Then, she trusted the men to continue the work they were already doing in their hometown.

Please see **CONNECTORS**, Page A6

### WISCONSIN

## Unemployment rate at 3.3%

Challenges stemming from quickly aging workforce loom large

**MITCHELL SCHMIDT**  
Lee Newspapers

Wisconsin's unemployment rate continues to outpace national trends as the economy recovers from workforce shortage challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, the percentage of working-age Wisconsinites currently employed or actively seeking work dropped from 65.6% in September to 65.3% in October, according to preliminary numbers from the state Department of Workforce Development. That still tracks above the national workforce participation rate of 62.6% last month.

Please see **UNEMPLOYMENT**, Page A3

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# Connectors

From A1

Bloyer said selflessness is key to doing the job well.

“You have to leave your ego at the door,” Bloyer said. “It’s not about them. It’s about what they’re able to give to others.”

The connectors have seemingly given much to others already. The school district reports that there is better attendance among students working with community connectors.

At the Nov. 7 RUSD board meeting, RUSD Superintendent Eric Gallien said he has received positive feedback about connectors’ work.

“In working with them, I’ve been blown away,” Racine County District Attorney Patricia Hanson said in praising the community connectors during the board meeting.

RUSD might hire more connectors in the future but currently does not have funding to do so.

“We’re just going to continue to see the work that these gentlemen do together, and we can add to it as we see fit or as it is appropriate,” Bloyer said.

## What is the job?

The connectors engage primarily with focus groups of 15 to 30 students on gang diversion but often interact daily with hundreds of students.

“We have a lot of kids who may be getting into (gangs) just because they’re around certain people,” Collier said. “I try to have a group of all kids who just want better for themselves, along with the kids who are already on that wrong path, because as a group there’s more depth to it.”

The connectors come from similar backgrounds and had similar experiences to many students they work with, so they are familiar with their decisions and want to steer students in the right direction.

“I feel I can give something back to teach the youth to make change in their lives,” said Joshua Mosley, Case High School community connector.

Ford said he was “a knucklehead” as a kid. He wants to help students in comparable positions.

“Sometimes their parents can’t reach them, sometimes their par-



DEE HÖLZEL, DEE.HOLZEL@JOURNALTIMES.COM

Troy Collier, Mitchell K-8 School community connector, left, chats with Racine Mayor Cory Mason, center, and Gov. Tony Evers at an event in July. Collier said the most rewarding part of his job is seeing students’ joy, whether it is because they won a football game, got their first job or received their driver’s license.

ents ain’t there, and that’s what we’re here for: to catch them,” Ford said. “We’re removing the excuses, and we’re holding the children accountable.”

The six connectors are all men of color who often work with students of color.

“A lot of times (students) say, ‘Oh, he don’t understand because he don’t look like me,’ because most of the teachers are white,” Ford said. “We can intervene in a situation. ‘Man, you can’t use that excuse with me.’”

The job includes proactive disciplinary intervention so that harsher discipline isn’t needed. For example, Collier had two students who didn’t get along play chess to determine their differences instead of being suspended.

Some connectors also meet twice per week with youth incarcerated at Racine County Juvenile Detention, 1717 Taylor Ave.

On Nov. 10 at Horlick, Farr coled a meeting with Own It, a Milwaukee-based peer mentoring group led by Rick Polk. Through the group meetings, Farr said he and Polk aim to provide inspiration and “interrupt toxic mindsets” of students.

“I believe that if we can change their minds, that will change their behaviors,” Farr said. “If we can change their mindsets and behaviors, it’ll change their destinies.”

The weekly Own It meetings have steadily grown at Horlick from about a dozen students to 75 kids. Own It meeting attendance at Case and Park high schools has

increased this year as well.

Farr spoke candidly to Horlick students about the work required to improve their lives. He encouraged and challenged them, saying they must decide if they want to make positive changes.

“It’s time to stop playing games with your lives,” Farr said. “It’s greatness in all of you.”

## Consistently showing up

The work is not all gang diversion and disciplinary intervention. Connectors also assist students with academics and often lend an ear to their frustrations. Farr said he recently had a conversation with an honor roll student who was considering dropping out of high school because of family pressure to attend college.

Connectors advocate for students to teachers and administrators in ways kids may not be able to.

“For that student, they feel stronger with me than without me,” Collier said. “We literally say, ‘OK, this is what you’re trying to say.’ ... When we’re involved, I think that it helps and balances the situation.”

The new role gives community connectors more authority to help students. Collier said the job title didn’t change how kids viewed him, but it earned him more respect from coworkers.

“Our colleagues see us as more of an asset,” Collier said. “They understand what we do and how effective we are.”

Building students’ self-confidence is key to effectiveness.

That can be done in several ways, including broadening their horizons through employment and extracurricular opportunities like the Racine County Summer Youth Employment Program.

“(We can) get them a part of something that they never thought they could be a part of, and that can ignite something in that kid to make that change,” Collier said.

Instead of harping on a student’s negative actions, the connectors mainly use positive reinforcement. Ishmael Perez, Park High School community connector, noted the importance of holding students to account while also offering the “spark of light” that kids need.

Consistently being part of students’ lives is key as well. It helps to have six connectors so at least one of them can attend most community situations, regardless of the time of day.

“Our job – it never really stops,” said Galen Horton, RUSD community connector.

The connectors have different ways to deal with the daily stresses of the job. They all rely on familial support systems and have hobbies to help them. Farr enjoys playing basketball. Perez and Collier love coaching football. Horton likes to journal.

## Growing together

Five community connectors have home schools, while Horton is a district connector who goes to buildings as needed, including elementary schools.

Their jobs change depending on the day, so the connectors have several group chats with daily updates. If one connector can’t reach the family of a student, for example, another connector likely knows how.

“Everybody brings a different ingredient to the gumbo,” Ford said.

This year is Ford’s first in the role, while the other five began in 2021. All six connectors knew one another before working together and said being colleagues has made them closer.

“There’s only growth that comes with this type of group,” Collier said. “We all benefit from being a part of this.”

Connectors have also received professional development training on topics like restorative practices, motivational interviewing

and conflict resolution.

Perez enjoys when the community connectors spend time together. During a group interview, they often cracked jokes with one another.

“When we’re just chilling, vibing, laughing, having fun, that’s relaxing for me and helps me clear my mind,” Perez said.

At the Nov. 10 Own It meeting, Farr spoke firmly, but he also joked with students.

“Humor is something that crosses all barriers,” Farr said.

## Challenges, rewards

The most rewarding part of the job is serving people in their hometown.

“I wake up every day loving what I do,” Perez said. “Watch the kids flourish and grow every day – there’s no better reward than that.”

Collier agreed, saying he loves seeing students’ joy, whether it is because they won a football game, got their first job or received their driver’s license.

He also appreciates seeing former students working with area youth.

“I can sleep good at night knowing that there are people who are younger than me doing what we do in their own way,” Collier said. “There are going to be people, when I’m gone, that are going to carry on what we’re doing.”

However, the connectors know growth is not always linear, and they can’t assist all students.

“The most challenging thing for me is wanting things for our kids and our communities that they don’t want for themselves,” Farr said. “I understand the harsh reality: some people are going to get it the right way, and some people are going to get it the wrong way.”

The goal of the job is “progress, not perfection,” Farr added.

Farr knows progress is an uphill battle, but he and his colleagues find meaning in that struggle.

“I’m not foolish or prideful to think that I can change the world,” Farr said, “but I refuse to accept that I can’t help.”

**REVIEW:** Scan this QR code to see RUSD’s organizational chart, and where the community connectors fall on it **NEWSVU**

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