

## Valerie Overton Howard

Valerie Overton Howard, affectionately known to many as “Pastor Valerie” because of her nurturing, and holy boldness, is a life coach, motivational speaker, and creative artist whose entrepreneurial spirit and interagency approach to community empowerment have been fortified by over thirty years of professional partnerships with various nonprofit community organizations. These nonprofit entities include, but are not limited to, the Lorain County Urban League, Lorain County Community Action Agency, Cornerstone Pregnancy Services, Elyria and Lorain YWCA, Lorain County Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services (LCADA), College Now, Starting Point, and Lorain City Schools. As one who understands how struggle can break the human spirit, Pastor Valerie is keenly attuned to the most vulnerable members of urban communities. She is committed to equipping the economically and socially disadvantaged with the tools needed to persist beyond barriers imposed by poverty, addiction, unplanned pregnancy, family dysfunction, politics, suicide, and so much more. She has applied this knowledge, innovation, and business acumen to the establishment of Releasing the Sound Productions where she is C.E.O., and to the implementation of an outreach called “The Love of Elizabeth.” Her future outreach goal includes an orphanage. She desires to provide a safe place that children call home, a place where they can grow and develop without abuse, neglect, or trauma.

Pastor Valerie is a native of Lorain, Ohio, and a graduate of Lorain Admiral King High School where early on she demonstrated leadership ability in sports and academics. As a young high school student, she established the “K Krew,” which was initially a spirit team of approximately 300 youth members. Its mission was to unite diverse races, backgrounds, genders, and classes in cheering school teams toward victory. The K Krew continued the mission of unity in diversity some twenty years after its initial inception, demonstrating the inspiring impact one encouraging presence can have in uplifting a community.

After graduating from Lorain Admiral King, Pastor Valerie continued her education at Lorain County Community College (LCCC) where she obtained an associate’s degree in art, and certification as a life coach. While matriculating at LCCC, Pastor Valerie was the recipient of the Phi Rho Pi award for outstanding oratorical ability and poetic performance. She was also selected to collaborate with Dr. Roy Church, LCCC president at the time, to promote a political campaign for community development called the University Partnership. Her selection to this prestigious role was the fulfillment of a divine vision she received as a child indicating that she would have positive influence in political arenas. The plan for the University Partnership passed with overwhelming support and has since served thousands of students since its inception. Pastor Valerie’s passion for community empowerment led her from LCCC to Cleveland State University where she pursued a bachelor’s degree in nonprofit management. The knowledge she obtained from academic study and practice in the field has inspired a myriad of educational workshops and programs focusing on life skills, marital enrichment, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, abstinence among youth, and self-love and esteem.

Pastor Valerie has mentored others in both ministry and professional spheres of leadership, encouraging those who sought guidance for employment, support during grief, or counseling for college. She organized the first ever Historically Black College and University (HBCU) College Fair in Lorain County, which received media coverage. Her most recent endeavor is an initiative

she named “Joining Forces to Save Lives,” a coalition of political leaders, police officials, mental health professionals, drug abuse counselors, faith leaders and other pivotal figures she has called together to address the ways that mental illness, opioid addiction, suicide, and other life-altering issues have intensified since the coronavirus emerged in local societies. Part of tackling the oppressive forces of poverty, addiction, stigma, and mental illness involves conversation and reflection with the aim of fostering change. To facilitate this process of reflection, Pastor Valerie has also established a media show called “Just Keeping It Real,” through which she moderates discussions about controversial and difficult topics. Her daughter, Alice Howard, is the co-moderator.

Pastor Valerie is a published author and psalmist. She has been featured in various news outlets including *Cleveland Magazine*. She has been nominated as one of the most influential women in the Lorain community for her exceptional service to youth, and she is the recipient of the Lula Garrett First Lady Award, which was bestowed by the Lorain Club of the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women. Yet, despite all the accolades she has received over the years, Pastor Valerie’s greatest achievements are having her children call her blessed, and knowing her name is written in the Lamb’s Book of Life.