

Statement of Commendation

Alison DesForges Memorial Award for Human Rights Activists in Western New York

The Alison DesForges Memorial Committee is pleased and honored to present Aaron Bartley, a Founder and President of People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH), with the Alison DesForges Memorial Award for Human Rights Activists in Western New York. Created in 2016, the Award is given each year to an individual or organization whose actions exemplify Alison's uncompromising commitment to advancing the cause of human rights and social justice.

Born and raised in Buffalo, Aaron has been described as "the pivotal figure in founding, developing, and sustaining PUSH, a community development engine of unparalleled power and impact on our City." According to one of his advocates, "There is no other individual in Western New York who has done more to ensure economic development, social justice and community sustainability for low and moderate-income individuals in our community." His recommendation continues: "In so doing, he has helped to transform the once forgotten and neglected West Side and built it into a vibrant beehive of economic and social activity that is home to tens of thousands of individuals, many of whom have come to Buffalo from other countries."

Aaron is a graduate of City Honors School, Swarthmore College, and Harvard Law School, where he led the Living Wage Campaign to increase the wages and benefits of 2,000 university service workers. Following his return to Buffalo, he joined Eric Walker in founding PUSH, which ultimately transformed a twenty-five block area on the West Side into a Green Development Zone. Described as a "radical grass roots organizer", Aaron also "works closely with governmental and corporate bodies to demand and enlist their assistance in realizing his projects and those of the residents of the neighborhood." Now, he has also turned his attention to addressing "some of the problems in the different, but also underprivileged, district in the Eastside of Buffalo."

Among the many outcomes of his efforts cited by his supporters, Aaron is credited with spearheading "after school programs for at-risk youth, housing for low and moderate income individuals, energy conservation and affordability programs, initiatives to bring public and private investments to the Westside, tenant advocacy, job training, and the creation of a new public park and neighborhood center."

As one of Aaron's supporters writes, "Aaron has emerged as a local and national voice for justice and human rights, moving people's hearts and minds with thoughtful writings and persuasive public speaking." He has been cited by Bill Moyers as an "Activist to Watch" and by the Huffington Post as one of the "twenty Activists who are changing America."

Moreover, Aaron's personal qualities as a leader personify the best qualities of an activist, as also exemplified by Alison DesForges: he is "unfailingly modest and self-effacing, a good listener," and committed to following the lead of those he serves. According to one nominator, "the work that Aaron has led is altogether consistent with the values that Alison so admirably championed."

April 27, 2017
Buffalo, New York

