"I'm a Minority, of a Minority, of a Minority"

A frank conversation with the Kentucky Legislature's only African-American woman, Attica Scott.

By Mary Chellis Austin

Photo by Mickie Winters

Speaking from atop a table at Garage Bar in NuLu in late January, State Rep. Attica Scott thanked a crowd of supporters for coming out to help her raise campaign funds and celebrate her birthday. The 46-year-old is petite but vocal, and she spoke of her work in Kentucky's House over her first year-plus in office, tackling things like education and gun violence.

"I was looking around and I was like, 'This is a reflection of community that I've worked for years to build,'" she says when I meet her later at Quills on U of L's campus. "I had District 41 people who were like, 'Yeah, I just saw you were having this event and wanted to come by and meet you.' That is what I'm talking about! I'm grateful that I'm creating a kind of energy where people feel like, it's a fundraiser, but she's not the kind of person where I have to have a $100, $200 check to show up."

Scott and her younger brother lived in the Beecher Terrace public-housing development for a time as children but bounced around a lot, staying with their mother on the West Coast and returning to Louisville to live with their grandmothers and other family members. Their father was in and out of jail. Their mother was crippled by alcohol and drug addiction and dead a few weeks shy of her 33rd birthday. "That has helped to shape who I am today as someone who believes that we have to do more for people who are struggling with these addictions and their families. We have to do more for kids whose parents are incarcerated. And we have to do more for people who are trying to provide for their families," Scott says. "If we're not providing living-wage jobs, then they're gonna find other ways of making sure that their baby's tummy isn't growling."

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Her parents, despite their struggles, instilled in Scott a deep understanding of her history as an African-American. She studied political science at a historically black college, Knoxville College in Tennessee, before attending the University of Tennessee, where she majored in communications. She later worked with Kentucky Jobs With Justice and taught at Bellarmine and Jefferson Community and Technical College. In 2010, while running for school board, she graduated from Emerge Kentucky, part of a national organization that trains Democratic women to run for office. She lost the seat but in 2011 won the District 1 Metro Council seat, covering parts of west and south Louisville. While she says she loved being able to dig in to help solve the everyday issues in neighborhoods, her term ended when she lost her re-election race in 2014 to current Councilwoman Jessica Green, whose mother preceded Scott.

In 2016 Scott ran for a seat in Kentucky House District 41 against 34-year incumbent Tom Riner, a conservative Democrat. The district stretches from impoverished parts of west Louisville to mega-wealthy areas like Mockingbird Gardens. A grassroots organizer at heart, Scott went knocking on doors and heavily networked to win, getting 52 percent of the vote in a three-way race and becoming the first African-American woman since 2000 to have a seat in the House. The win launched her into the national spotlight. Last year, Scott, along with the likes of Michelle Obama and filmmaker Ava DuVernay, was named one of *Essence* magazine's Woke 100 Women, recognized for work on equal rights and inclusion.

She has since helped launch three Emerge affiliates in other cities and remains close to the network, often

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learning of successful legislation that she can bring back to Kentucky. This year, and since entering office, she has introduced 10 bills — on reducing gun violence by making it illegal for someone who has committed a hate crime to have a gun; on repealing the charter school law; on creating a new class of misdemeanor to reduce felonies. She also works full-time with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as a community coach, working to build a culture of health by identifying what causes poor health rather than looking at access to health care. This is the core of Scott, who sees and addresses society's ills holistically and nags — often on social media — at the root causes, fighting for things like living-wage jobs, affordable housing, safe neighborhoods and equitable education. The day after the birthday party/fundraiser, the deadline to file to run for this year's election came to a close with no one opposing Scott.

In early February, Scott's Twitter profile picture became a portrait of her dressed as a character from the Marvel Comics movie *Black Panther*, which is set in a fictional African nation and was directed and written by and prominently features black artists. Dr. Angelique Johnson, CEO of the tech startup MEMStim, made the photo, blew it up poster-size and erected it at a special preview screening of the movie at Baxter Avenue Theatres. "I've had so many people ask me on Facebook where can they get a poster, saying they'd love to see it up in schools," Scott tells me as we sit down for the following interview. "It speaks to the fact that so many young black people still have not seen themselves reflected in positive lights on the big screen but also in political office, especially black women, and the fact that they're seeing that, they want a piece of it. They want a poster that they can put up and look at and say, 'You, too, can go from living in the housing development of Beecher Terrace to serving in the state capitol.'"

How did you come to reflect on and learn from your experiences?
"Growing up, at least in Beecher Terrace, I wasn't really engaged and involved and paying attention to what was happening politically, and it wasn't like a lot of politicians were coming to our neighborhood, to our community. But despite the challenges that my parents had, they were both very much committed to my younger brother and I having a deep respect for ourselves and the history of our people as black folks. They taught us at home about black history and what black people have done in this country. They made sure we knew about the Black Panther political party and what it did for our community with free breakfast and lunch programs, for example, and starting newspapers, which helped with improving literacy in black neighborhoods. I intentionally attended a historically black college so that I could be even more immersed in a black political consciousness, and that really helped to shape me in who I am today."

You went to Coleridge-Taylor in Beecher Terrace and then were bused to St. Matthews elementary. Do you think desegregated busing positively affected you?
"Because I was so young, I can't say that busing affected me academically, but socially it made a difference because I would have never gotten out of Beecher Terrace or west Louisville if it hadn't been for busing. My mother never owned a car, so we were never going very far. Socially and culturally, it made a difference for me to have those kinds of life experiences that were outside of that one area."

So the argument that kids are on a bus for an hour and people need more choice to be able to send their kids—
"Kids are on a bus for an hour in rural areas, and that's not by choice — it's because it's a rural area, so the school is 40 minutes away."

You went to Manual. Your son went to Manual. Jerry Mayes, the principal there, has been in the news for questioning students' motivations for kneeling during the national anthem and comparing their experiences to the discrimination he had faced as a white male Protestant. That hasn't been sitting well with the students and parents, who have come forward with more stories about how he had tried to block a black student union from forming and kept a transgender student's story from appearing in the yearbook. What do you make of someone who is freely saying these things?

"The fact that he can freely say those comments says something about the system as a whole — that the system empowers someone like him to exist in that kind of leadership position. So we've got to look from the top on out, for the kinds of mentalities and environments that allow for a principal to feel like they can say racist comments to students of color or bully transgender students and get away with it."

You were elected in spring 2016 and that fall the House went from majority Democrat to Republican for the first time in almost 100 years.
"As I was saying to someone recently, I'm a minority of a minority of a minority, so for me it was still a similar situation because, one, I'm the only woman of color, period, in the legislature. Two, I'm part of a caucus of black people who are the superminority in the legislature. And third, now I'm part of a political party that's the superminority in the legislature. But I still would have been going into an environment where I would have been a minority of a minority. I still would have been the only woman of color. I still would have been part of a caucus of literally a handful and a half of black people. So I still would have had to push the same way that I am now to be heard and to make sure that my colleagues, who can be conservative, my Democratic colleagues, are hearing my stories and experiences from the people that I serve in District 41."

What kinds of experiences?
"So the first year that I was in office, 2017, one of the bills that we discussed was the neighborhood-schools bill, and one of the presenters said all of these awful things about urban and inner-city kids and that if they weren't in school they'd walk down the street shooting people and shooting up drugs. And I'm sitting there — I was the only black person present at that committee meeting because it was upon the adjournment of the House and many people had already left, so that meeting was by design, and none of the white people said anything. And I'm looking to my left and to my right."

Were there Louisvillians there?
"Yes, there were Louisvillians there! Not one of them said a word. So it was left up to me as the only black person on the panel to say something to this person. And I said that I was insulted. I was offended. And I said that you're talking about my children and children that I represent. I couldn't believe that anyone would actually think that that's a reality, that kids are just walking down the street shooting folks. That doesn't even sound right. That isn't even on the worst episode of *CSI* or *Law & Order*. I was very upset and I made it very clear that I was upset by those comments."

What are the meetings like now?
"Well, we haven't had those kinds of contentious issues yet, in part because, unfortunately, you have legislators who want to wait till the filing deadline to then tackle the tougher issues. So now we're gonna start seeing the tougher bills being presented and debated, but last week in our education committee meeting we were talking about a bill about soft skills. It seems harmless — let's teach kids how to work together and be employable, show up on time. I was the only person that said, 'How do we ensure that the council will be diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender and race and geography?' No one else had even thought of that. I am still, even though I no longer teach at Bellarmine and JCTC, I'm still an educator in Frankfort to my colleagues."

When have you made a mistake on a vote?
"On the last day of the session in 2017, we voted on this $15-million economic-development incentive package, and the governor would not reveal what it was for because of what we often hear with these kinds of deals — that you don't want the competition to get wind of what you may be offering. And so, trying to be a team player, I voted for the bill and then found out months later that the president and CEO of this company was the person who posted on his Facebook page that any of his employees who take a knee at work in solidarity with football players would be fired from their job. I didn't have any idea of this person's oppressive political views and wish I had known that when I took my original vote back in March of 2017. I feel like the wool was pulled over our eyes."

You lost the Metro Council race in 2014 to Jessica Green. At the time, Walmart was planning to come to west Louisville and you helped defeat those plans. As you saw it, it would offer non-living-wage jobs, and that the company has a history of exploiting workers. But a lot of people wanted a job, something. People are still bitter about it.
"And now you will have Passport Health (headquarters, at the same site, on 18th Street and Broadway). So you have a health-focused initiative in west Louisville where we need healthy and safe neighborhoods. I like that alternative. And they're bringing jobs. Literally hundreds of jobs in the health field. And right now, with the attacks on health care, I appreciate the fact that we have something that to me is even better than a Walmart."

You've run all these campaigns while raising your two children. You still have a kid in school, but you're so active and busy.
"It's also the best thing ever because my kids are now so politically aware in ways that their classmates are not. They will come home and they're frustrated that, like, 'Oh my goodness, why do my classmates not know who the governor of Kentucky is? Or who their school board member is?' I'm like, 'Well, just calm down, because you've had a different kind of experience.' And inside I'm like: *That's right, why don't they know? Hmm. We've got some work to do.* But I also am the kind of mom that's always had my kids involved in whatever I'm doing because one of the lessons I learned from the civil rights movement is that a lot of kids resented that movement because they weren't with their parents when they went away to whatever action or activity they were doing. My kids were always there with me. I've got pictures of my kids holding bullhorns and leading chants and at protests when they were younger, long before I ever ran for office. My kids have always been folks who were knocking on doors with their classmates, saying, 'I want to knock on the door by myself. I don't want an adult with me.' It just makes me

feel empowered for them to be able to speak from an educated perspective about why their mom is running for office and these are the issues that she's concerned about. That's fantastic! I encourage moms all the time: If you're thinking about running for office, do it and engage your kids. Today is a snow day for Jefferson County Public Schools and my daughter's gonna go to Frankfort with me."

What's she gonna do?
"She's gonna go to a committee meeting, go to the gallery and the House chambers and watch the House chamber meetings, and then in between all of that she's gonna be sitting on the couch in my office doing homework."

That's exciting for a kid to be able to do that.
"And I also encourage people across the commonwealth: Come visit us in Frankfort if you get the opportunity. Just come see it. I want to demystify what people think about politicians. It's really not that deep, folks. We're folks that shop at Kroger when we think it's time to get bread and milk because we think it might be a snow or ice storm, just like you."

What has it been like working with Gov. Matt Bevin?
"I have not had the interest in or opportunity to work with the governor. We are very different people who have very different political, cultural and social philosophies, and much of what he does and says is an insult to the community that I represent. So if there were an opportunity for us to work on something that was about social justice and human rights, then I would welcome that. We have not yet had that opportunity."

Have you met him?
"I met him once walking down the hallway."

What was that like?
"It was non-eventful."

Did he say hi?
"He did and I said 'Hello' and kept walking. I am not interested in

engaging with someone who says that when a shooting happens in west Louisville it's a cultural problem, but then if a shooting happens somewhere else in Kentucky, like Marshall County, we say it's a smaller community and just can't believe it happened here and let's get everyone across the commonwealth to stand in solidarity with Marshall County. We need everyone in the commonwealth to stand in solidarity with every single child that's shot anywhere in this commonwealth. It shouldn't be something that he picks and chooses based on the majority ethnicity or race in an area. And his response to shootings in Louisville has been to walk around the block and pray. That is not action. That is not gonna change institutions and systems or neighborhoods. I believe in the power of prayer, but I believe it has to be backed up with action and he is not that person. We just don't see eye to eye on it."

He blocked you on Twitter.
"I'm the first legislator that any of us are aware of that he has blocked on Twitter, so he made it very clear that he wouldn't engage in a conversation with me either. And I wouldn't engage with him in a conversation on social media. I would make it clear on social media that I disagree with him on something, but if we're gonna engage in a conversation, governor, why don't you meet with our black caucus? And sit down with our black caucus and say, 'There are some real issues that are impacting people of color in our commonwealth. What are you all doing back home to address those issues? How can I be supportive as governor? What do you all need?' He hasn't done that."

You sound like you would be more open as governor.
"People have asked me to run for governor, but I am a policy person. I deeply love public policy and the gubernatorial position would not allow me to be a legislator who's working on policy every single day."

You wouldn't want to be governor?
"I'm not interested in being governor. And I say that now and like many politicians, sometimes your mind changes, right? When you have enough people who keep saying to you, 'This is what we need you to do'…. I have people from eastern Kentucky, western Kentucky, northern Kentucky, central Kentucky who are constantly messaging me, or they'll see me somewhere and say, 'You need to run for governor.'"

You seem like such a busy person with lots of causes and connections. How do you decide which causes to go after and when to rest?
"I have been committed for years to really being clear about my self-care. As much as I am able, I give myself evenings and weekends to either be with myself to do some self-reflection, reading, meditation, or have fun — go to the movies or spend some time with my girlfriends or my family. That's vitally important to me. I prioritize that. As far as the work of being a legislator, I have no problem saying no when people ask me to do something because I understand that no is a complete sentence and I've understood that for a long time. And I also am clear that sometimes I'm not the person who should do what someone is asking me to do. There may be another legislator who it's their area of expertise. And I'm also clear on what I'm passionate about and where I want to focus and put my energy. I'm very passionate about education issues and criminal-justice reform and children and women's health, and so those have been priority areas for me. And I'm also very passionate about our environment and environmental issues. I also believe deeply in civic engagement. I encourage people to step up, so if there's something that someone is asking me to do that can be done by a community group or organization, I lift up those community groups and organizations."

The climate of the country has changed since the presidential election, and shortly after that you entered the House in a very conservative state. Have you also gotten a lot of negative attention from people?
"After the November 2016 elections, there was a particular focus on women of color who won office, and that was huge. That was important for people to hear in November 2016, to say: You know what, folks, despite this national win and change that we're seeing, there are women of color who kicked butt all across this country and won their elections. We have to remember that because as women of color we're always pushing to get our feet in the door, and we have not always had our own political party support, regardless of whatever political party we're a part of. I talk about that now, about this wave of women running for office, and I'm like, yeah, waving my hand over here because many women of color have been trying to do that, but you've kept the door closed to us. Now we're beginning to see that door widen for women of color.

"And yes, I've had some negative attention as well. And that goes with being in office, and I understand that the higher up in office you go, the more negative attention you get, naturally, because you're serv-

ing more people. I'm actually serving twice as many people now than I served on Metro Council. It's always so interesting to watch white people step up when other white people are attacking me, on social media in particular. And I actually appreciate that. I have people attacking my hair on social media and talking about my locks because they've never seen a person in Kentucky in office who is a black woman with natural hair like mine. Some white people just don't get it. It's like a mind-blowing thing. I have white people step up and say, 'Wait a minute, you are not gonna do this. In fact, let's educate you about exactly what you're doing right now with your body-shaming and the lack of knowledge and understanding you have about what it means to be a black woman who has decided not to put chemicals in her hair and what a difficult decision that is.' I don't even get a chance sometimes to respond because white people have already responded. That's huge because I know what it's like to be the only one to respond. It feels good to not always have to do that and to have other people willing to step up."

Several years ago, you said in this magazine that you didn't think Louisville could have a black mayor. Do you still believe that?

"When I look at what's happening now with SCALA (Steering Committee for Action on Louisville's Agenda, an invite-only group that aims to solve problems in education, airport travel and crime) — the secretive group that's mostly white people who are deciding what's best for Louisville — you know what? That tells me it probably remains the same — that if we have that kind of mentality in Louisville, where the wealthy think that they are best-suited simply because of the privilege of money to make the decisions for us, then we're in the same position that we were years ago when I said that we weren't yet ready for a black mayor, and the only way that that's gonna change is if people in the community, people on the ground doing good and important work, continue to speak up. And that's what's happening. It's because of our local media and because of people in the community that have been pushing back against this secretive group that it's come to light, and all of the issues around it have come to the forefront. If we keep doing that to people and pushing back and saying, 'No, you don't get to make decisions for all of us without us,' then eventually we'll get to the day when we'll be ready for a black mayor or Latinx mayor or someone who's openly queer."

You've been fighting for a lot of the same things for years now. What gives you hope that real change can happen in those areas?

"To have 40 educators running for (state) office, people who are in the classroom with kids whose parents are incarcerated — so they see the impact on family, on kids, especially on low-level offenses — now they're gonna have the opportunity to serve in office and to be the people who champion criminal-justice reform, for lack of a better term right now. They're gonna be the people who speak up and say, 'We need this because we're destroying families otherwise. We're destroying school

systems otherwise.' We have kids within the school system not ready to learn because of what they're experiencing at home or in their communities. I'm excited that, because of many of those educators, we're gonna get to the point where we have real transformation in our public policies, transformations that are going to improve the outcomes for kids all across the commonwealth."

You mentioned the impact incarceration has on kids. One of the members of Dear JCPS, a grassroots organization working to improve public education, wrote in the *Courier Journal* the other day, saying that while there are legitimate issues within JCPS, the lack of achievement stems mostly from poverty and systemic racism. How have you seen those issues play out in education?

"Even before our kids get to a classroom, what are they experiencing in the community? You may recall the shooting that happened on 32nd Street in 2012. Well, my son, his bus stop was right there at the corner of 32nd and Greenwood where the shooting happened. His bus couldn't stop there. It had to take him to Central High School. I had to leave work and go pick him up and then he had to go back to school the next day as if nothing happened, as if that trauma doesn't exist for him or his neighborhood or his household. So we have to think about what our kids are experiencing, what they're witnessing. We have to think about how we have some kids that are getting up in the morning, walking to school past abandoned and vacant houses, and we don't know what's going on in those abandoned and vacant houses.

"I live in the Parkland neighborhood, and a third of our housing stock is abandoned or vacant. A third. So our kids are walking to Brandeis Elementary School or they're getting dropped off at the West End School and they're inevitably going to pass an abandoned or vacant house. You're not going to experience that in most neighborhoods in east Louisville. There are some real inequities that need to be addressed before we can expect that all of our

kids are gonna be academically successful when they're sitting in class stressed about where they're gonna sleep tonight and making sure that they eat enough at lunch, because all they're gonna eat the entire day might be breakfast and lunch at school. If we're not addressing those issues and recognizing that some parents have to work a full-time job, a part-time job or put together two or three part-time jobs because we're not paying living wages, there's something wrong with the fabric of our community and those kinds of issues are at the front of our kids' minds, not making sure that they study for the next test."

You sponsored a bill to repeal the charter school law, which passed last year to allow state funding for privately operated schools. Is there any situation where you would be open to charter schools?

"It's difficult for me to say that I would be open to charter-school legislation when we have failed to fully fund our public schools since 2008. It's been a decade since our schools have seen a funding increase. Until we can say that we've done all that we can to fully support our public schools, then at this point I cannot say that I would be in support of charter schools.

"I am a critic of JCPS, but I do hear about what JCPS is doing well. I will have to say that I appreciate that JCPS is trying to look at: How do you make sure that parents who had a felony conviction can volunteer in their kid's classroom? That's a big deal. That's a big issue, and when I was part of the team that was working from a community perspective on restoration of voting rights for people who were once incarcerated, that issue came up over and over again, parents telling the story of, 'I can't even read to my baby's class because I have a felony. So when all these other parents go on a field trip, my baby's by him or herself 'cause I can't go.' I appreciate that JCPS has been working for years to try to navigate that and say, 'OK, let's make it possible for parents to be parents, 'cause people have criticized these same parents for not being involved or engaged but yet won't look at why they can't be.'"

Do you think Mayor Fischer deserves the vote of people in west Louisville?
"That's questionable because he has supported bio-digesters, for example, in west Louisville, which a number of residents pushed back on and that's the reason we don't have it. The mayor supported development in other parts of Louisville while we have not necessarily seen economic support in west Louisville. I didn't see him advocating and pushing for a Walmart anywhere but in west Louisville. So why can't we have something better? Why can't we have something different? Why do we have to have something that's either paying the lowest wages or has lost class-action lawsuits for not elevating women to managerial positions? Is that really what we have to have in west Louisville? No, it's not."

Even with all of the plight, there is a lot of pride in west Louisville. What do you love about your neighborhood?
"Well, there are deep roots that people have to their neighborhoods in west Louisville. I mean, Louisville is a city of neighborhoods. We in west Louisville care deeply about our neighborhoods and our neighbors. I grew up in the black church in west Louisville, and so that's another place where as a young person I was able to look up and see black people who were leading Sunday school lessons and ushering and encouraging young people to succeed in whatever ways make the most sense for us to succeed. I think that's the case for many people. Not all, because not everyone is churched, but for me as someone who was churched, that was important. It's also important to know that there are so many people who are connected to the deep and rich history that exists in west Louisville and who know about the names — the people who are on the names of the schools here and the streets here, to know that people have family members who are on street signs. I think that's part of the reason why so many people do stay here in west Louisville and do wanna roll up their sleeves and dig deep into the work to make west Louisville better — for all of us that live here and for people who would like to live here."