

The Baltimore Sun's 25 Women to Watch 2020: Best in advocacy, business and health

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China Boak Terrell of American Communities Trust (Lloyd Fox / Baltimore Sun)

China Boak Terrell

43, CEO of American Communities Trust

China Boak Terrell shooed away the warnings that she'd regret skipping her senior year at Oxon Hill High School in Prince George's County. Fiercely determined, she accepted a scholarship to the Johns Hopkins University and dove into studies that led her to become a corporate lawyer.

Successful well before her 30th birthday, Terrell upended her career when doctors uncovered and treated an aneurysm in her heart and dangerous blood clots.

After the doctors saved Terrell's life, she couldn't shake one question: What would people say at her funeral? She was hit with clarity: "I wanted to build up people and help rebuild communities."

So she set out to transform her life. She became a foster mother while living in Minnesota and moved back to the East Coast, where she went to work for the Washington, D.C., government to give herself time to figure out how she wanted to redesign her life for maximum good. Eventually, she went to Harvard University to earn a master's degree in public administration on a mission to help solve economic inequality for Black and brown communities.

That mission led her and her family to Baltimore in June 2016 when Terrell became chief executive officer of American Communities Trust.

The national partner works to bring investment to low-income, urban neighborhoods, all the while building wealth for the families who live there. For Terrell and her team, one of the signature projects is the Baltimore Pumphouse, which is transforming a formerly blighted property into a bustling hub for business and food production at Wolfe and Oliver streets.

Scott Goldman, director of The 6th Branch, a nonprofit that taps military veterans to serve communities, said Terrell is developing investment strategies worth millions of dollars.

“China is a force of nature,” Goldman said.

The pandemic has made her already hard job harder. But Terrell refuses to sit back and watch Black and brown communities suffer the same years-long lag in recovery behind whites that data predict the outbreak will bring: “We have to speed up solving economic inequality.”

— *Yvonne Wenger*