

Julian McTizic

Bolivar, Tenn.

Mayor

When Julian McTizic was 30 years old, he made history in his hometown of Bolivar, Tenn., after being elected as the city's youngest-ever mayor, as well as its first Black mayor. A Bolivar native, he ran because he had served on the city council and wanted to be a catalyst for positive change. He earned spots on the Bolivar General Hospital Healthcare Foundation and on the board of trustees of Western Mental Health Institute. Below, he talks with Communications Coordinator Lacey Lyons about the ways mayors of small towns like Bolivar can improve the health of their communities.

What made you decide to run for mayor of your hometown of Bolivar?

"I was on the city council when I decided to run for mayor. Once I got on city council, the former mayor that I was serving with, we started to just have a difference of opinion on how we could get things done or move things forward in the city. I said, 'If I couldn't be a catalyst for change, I'd just rather not be a part.' I didn't want to be fighting against the bureaucrats in office. So, I ran and won."

What was that process like?

"It was one of the hardest things I've had to go through. I didn't have a clue about the back end of politics, and the good-ole-boy system, and how much money and power were involved. The guy that I ran against was very wealthy and had been in office for a number of years. He was in the military, and I had maybe \$100 from my savings account. I went door-to-door, started talking to people, and asked them for support. He outraised me in money, but signs and money don't vote. After enough knocking on doors and talking to people, I started finally getting support. I had a few big donations, but the majority of my donations were \$20 or less. The election was in 2017, so I was asking people for \$20.17 to fund a better Bolivar in 2017. I got hate mail and people calling my phone, calling me racial slurs. I didn't want anybody's sympathy, but it was hard. I could tell you so many stories, but it was just a part of it. But I made it. And my last election was night and day. Any election is hard, but the hardest part about my last election was trusting that people would come out. I've been in three elections, and I've made it through all three victories so far."

Was healthcare one of your campaign issues when you ran the first time?

"We talked about it in the last election, because it was during COVID. But my biggest priority when it comes to healthcare is trying my best to have a healthier community and healthier workplaces. We don't often think about how health plays a part in community and economic development. You can't work if you're at home sick all the time. If you're in manufacturing, or in any position, we need you at work, and we need you healthy. Your family needs you at home and needs you healthy. You can't be your best if you're dealing with diabetes, or high blood pressure, or other problems that you can prevent. A healthier lifestyle can help with that."

Has messaging around the importance of healthy lifestyles worked well at the local level?

“Yes. The local level of politics is the closest to the people. A lot of people don’t understand that. We’ve seen a lot more people being active in our parks and taking advantage of the natural resources that we have. We’ve also made our parks tobacco-free.”

What are some of the most important health issues Bolivar faces overall, and what solutions do you see?

“Our biggest issue is access to healthcare. We’re fortunate that we still have our hospital here in Bolivar. But most people don’t have health insurance, so they won’t go to the doctor. They won’t do preventative care, because they can’t afford it. The people who can afford it go to Jackson or Memphis.

We also deal with a lack of motivation. People are not always taking care of themselves. Sometimes, they don’t understand the effects of what their lifestyles do to them in the long term.”

Are local organizations helping to provide solutions to the problems Bolivar faces regarding healthcare?

“We have a lot of that here. We formed a coalition called Healthy Hardeman Outreach, or H2O for short. They distribute fliers and pamphlets and put up billboards trying to inform people about improving access to healthy food and preventing obesity. [H2O is a partnership between Bolivar General Hospital, the Hardeman County Health Department, and the Hardeman County Community Health Center.] I do a series every Thursday and Friday called Walk with the Mayor. We go on a walk for 30 minutes, and at the end of the year, I give out gift cards to everyone who participated. We’ve had a lot of response from community groups.”

What solutions do you see to the healthcare challenges Bolivar faces? Do you talk with people about Medicaid expansion as a possibility?

“Every time we get the chance, I try to get our state legislators to understand that we need it [Medicaid expansion.] That money, if it’s not going to Tennessee, it’s going somewhere else. Why not take it? If we passed Medicaid expansion, I would want to increase the accessibility of healthcare. There are a lot of small-business owners, a lot of self-employed families, who don’t have health benefits. Some are contractors or auto mechanics who won’t even look at purchasing it, because it’s way too expensive. There are also low-income families in the [medical] benefits gap. But the government just assumes, ‘This person doesn’t want to work.’ But those people are not taking advantage of the system; they’re surviving.”

In what ways is it possible to form public-private partnerships to explore solutions, and what are the limitations of doing so?

“That’s the only way we can get things done. There are certain ways to go about things when you’re a government entity. When it comes to policymaking, it just takes a lot longer. If a private organization decides to build a homeless shelter, it can get a contract; put the plans together; obtain funding and have all that done quicker than a government. They have to have planning commission meetings, subcommittee meetings, meetings to approve the bids on the contractor and I still haven’t moved dirt yet. The private sector can work a lot more efficiently than government. If we’re smart in using those public-private partnerships, we can get things done a lot quicker.”

What are your personal connections to the issue of healthcare?

“As a leader, people follow you. Instead of saying what people should be doing, I try to just do it. When we do Walk with the Mayor, I’m not always there, but when I am, it’s exciting for people to know I’m going to be there. While I walk with them, they tell me about stuff they’ve got going on in their personal lives. It’s like how it’s a lot easier to get up and go to the gym if you know someone is going to meet you there. We talk about everything from sports, to family, to work life. It depends who I’m walking next to.”

Can you speak a little bit about mental-health access in rural areas and the challenges there?

“We’re a little unique in Bolivar, because we do have Western Mental Health. But mental health is more challenging to deal with. People don’t talk about it as much as physical health. If I go to the doctor and am diagnosed with cancer, I’m not necessarily ashamed of that. We can’t see mental-health problems. We only feel the results. Our family, friends, and coworkers feel them. I wish we could say, ‘Let me help you.’ If I have blood pressure medicine, I’m not looked at differently, but if I’m taking medication for mental health, there is a negative connotation. It shouldn’t be like that. Some people assume there’s nothing that can be done [for mental-health issues.] We try to let people know there are solutions and ways to meet their mental-health needs. People have to feel like it’s okay to seek that out.”