

Detroit Black Co-op Case Studies

Nsoroma Unschool Co-op

Nsoroma Unschool, an African-centered homeschool cooperative in Detroit slowly came together after the Black Education Workshop (BEW) hosted by Alkebulan Village in the Winter of 2022. They are a collection of 7 dues-paying families with children ages 1-8 years old. Launching on the Autumnal Equinox, the groups meets in-person once a week to provide enrolled children with a divinely nourishing educational environment. Parents rotate lesson facilitation, group meals and other responsibilities that are key to sustaining the cooperative culture of the institution. Through a democratic voting process, they selected their name within the spirit of honoring the existing relationships with the Nsoroma Institute Detroit family (one of the key players in the 2022 Black Education Workshop) and the desire to build upon the dynamic legacy that institution has stewarded in Detroit. Nature is a core part of the living curriculum that is ever evolving as the co-op grows. Each weekly lesson aspires to touch on five basic elements for optimal growth of the children: nature (ecology), literacy, math, African history and current events.

The group is guided the following goals:

- Create an educational environment where our children and their families can develop a strong sense of self and community, self and cultural awareness, physical, mental, and emotional confidence and a keen knowing of freedom.
- Develop an educational environment rooted in accountability, trust, open-mindedness, collective care and one African love of which children, parents, teachers, caregivers and supporters are beholden.
- Adopt the praxis of radical unschooling that remains student-led, honors each student's learning style and engages all student age groups.
- Center our relationships to one another, our ancestors and our Creator in all decisions we make and how we do the work.
- Weave a cooperative web of childcare support for all involved families to uplift that every parent, child and family deserves and should have opportunities for individual work, play, reflection and space regardless of access to funds or conventional childcare.

Some challenges include retaining deep engagement of member families, developing appropriate general structures (curriculum, finance, fundraising, family engagement, etc.), facilitating accountability for equitable participation in role rotation (teaching lessons, clean up after meals, etc.) and creating systems across different viewpoints. Some successes include the growing relationships among families, the intimate bonds formed among the children, the measurable learning exhibited by the children and optimism of growing into a full-scale school with a building and beyond. Looking towards the future the group intends to scale out family engagement and membership, hire instructors and adjust meeting schedules to meet family needs.

Black Bottom Garden Center



The Black Bottom Garden Center is a for-profit co-op founded and led by six Black women in Detroit's North End. The center operates as an LLC at Oakland Avenue Urban Farm. The group participated in the Detroit Community Wealth Fund's (DCWF) North End Co-op Academy and Incubator, a 16-week program and launched during COVID in 2021. The garden center grew out of existing friendships and community and arose out of the brainstorming of what businesses residents wanted to see in their community. The name, Black Bottom, references the fertile Black soil that so easily grew things [in the former Black Bottom community], but also in reference to the thriving Black businesses that existed there before the freeway was built through it and took them away. As they navigate inequities for Black-women owned businesses and struggle to attain resources, they affirm a common co-op principles of monetary investment and sweat equity carrying the same weight. They are on the journey of identifying the true business partners, developing trust and care with each other, developing standard operating procedures and overall

growing the businesses according to their vision of making all customers “Black Bottom Happy.” They currently sell garden items such as seeds, plants, compost, planting pots, and cultivation tools. Some challenges they have experienced include: identifying competitors through market research, organizing around personal lives, leveraging Black buying power and developing Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and financial tracking mechanisms.

Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund Grower Co-op



The Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), Keep Growing Detroit, and Oakland Avenue Urban Farm - are 3 long standing Detroit urban farming organizations. On Juneteenth 2020, the collective food sovereignty and land security work culminated in the creation of the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund (DBFLF). The coalition works to rebuild Black intergenerational wealth for Black Detroiters through land acquisition, infrastructure and equipment readiness, shared resource systems and community support networks. This work is

imperative at this critical juncture given the enormous loss of Black-owned land over the decades. Over 3 million acres of Black land has been stolen by white supremacist systems and Black farmers currently comprise about 1% of the total farming population compared to 14% a century ago. Fighting gentrification, speculative development, and outright genocide of our people, DBFLF continues to smash the narrative that the "best use" of vacant land is based on financial worth alone. Black growers save the world, every day. From expanding their farms and gardens to combat blight, providing produce, meals and knowledge to their neighbors, and courageously growing on land despite being unable to afford it, they lead the charge towards an abundant ecosystem rooted in land security.

Moving towards Black food sovereignty requires practices beyond racial capitalism. Therefore, the DBFLF piloted a grower cooperative in 2022 as a way to build capacity, relationships and power within Detroit's food system. All 9 growers in the pilot were DBFLF awardees from 2020 and 2021. Within the spirit of starting small, the group selected 2 crops to begin aggregating for 2 main buyers. Keep Growing Detroit's (KGD) Grown in Detroit (GID) program and Eastern Market bought tomatoes and collard greens from the group at retail prices. This pricing scale was significant because growers, especially small urban growers selling at specific volumes, are often pushed to sell at wholesale prices. For economic justice, DBFLF advocated for the growers to attain a larger share of the food system profits to increase their farm financial viability. Each grower received a \$500 collective care stipend to fund the variety of farm needs (irrigation, seeds, compost, etc.) to support their participation in the cooperative. DBFLF also provided tomato and collard green transplants and storage bins for harvesting and transporting to the distribution site, Oakland Avenue Urban Farm (OAUF). Buyers picked up from the distribution site at selected times that overlapped with growers' drop-off hours. Growers with interest and capacity rotated working the distribution site for hourly compensation and committed to a specific volume throughout the season. DBFLF paid growers for their produce after weekly distributions prior to receiving payment from the buyers to hopefully prevent financial strain waiting for payments from institutions that can take some time. By the middle of the season, 7 growers remained part of the pilot.

Some challenges learned in the pilot season included growers meeting agreed upon volumes made to buyers, growers remaining accountable to the quality standards for harvesting and timely drop off, developing structural processes for weighing in and storing produce, DBFLF coordinators and growers managing the distribution site accordingly with recordkeeping and spatial organizing. Some triumphs included strengthening relationships among growers and between the buyers and the entire group and collectively troubleshooting problems that would arise throughout the process. To address these challenges, the 2023 season was planned with significant amendments. Some examples include: paying growers to serve in key structural roles of the cooperative such as accounting, marketing strategy and meeting facilitation, requiring each growers to commit to a food safety plan for their individual operation, providing transportation to distribution site by co-op drivers. The 2023 season opened with 8 growers with majority of them serving in paid structural roles of developing the work the co-op. Looking towards the future, the DBFLF co-op intends to explore member and market expansion, individual and cooperative business planning and group certifications.