

Project Location: Detroit, Michigan

May 1, 2016 through August 31, 2016

Project Summary:

Auntie Na's House (ANH) is a grassroots community outreach center on the West side of Detroit. Sonia Brown - known throughout the neighborhood as Auntie Na - began this program over 10 years ago by providing a reliable meal to her children and their friends. Over the years, ANH has served as a free childcare center, food and clothing distribution hub, community garden, performance venue, computer lab, and temporary shelter. To the neighborhood, it is a home where diverse people come together to break bread and create change. The bulk of ANH's patrons are low-income black families, people with developmental disabilities, those recovering from drug addiction, and survivors of domestic violence.

The economic collapse of Detroit brought hard times for many families, and ANH swelled with people who fell through the cracks of government aid programs. Her house weathered the crash with the sustained support of Oberlin College students, who for three years have assisted in rebuilding and beautifying the program, despite a flood and a fire. Now Auntie Na hopes to expand her program into "Auntie Na's Village." This would include a sustainable urban garden, tutoring and workforce development programs, and improved shelter options. In a city where poverty, racism, and a lack of opportunity drive many to despair or violence, Auntie Na hopes to promote peace through organizing, educating, and empowering the youth in her neighborhood. Our Project for Peace is to support the transition into Auntie Na's Village and run a pilot version of its centerpiece: Auntie Na's Peewee Planters Program, a summer employment program for youth in Auntie Na's community.

Project Background

For generations, the house has been a safe haven for dozens of children without secure homes. Auntie Na's grandmother, Ernestine, held regular neighborhood meals in the home, tended to a thriving vegetable garden in the backyard, and taught neighborhood children how to garden and cook. The love and dedication of Auntie Na and her family have helped her community to survive during the hardest of times.

These times are not any easier. Seven years after the collapse of the housing market, many Detroiters still have no access to quality education or nutritious food. In 2011, in order to balance its budget, the City of Detroit decided to close half of its public schools over four years, including at least four in Auntie Na's neighborhood.¹ Youth growing up in these dire conditions have few opportunities for education and employment. Lack of access to affordable healthy food is an alarming problem in Detroit and can harm youth as much as closed schools. 48% of households with at least one child in Detroit rely on food stamps, and 92% of all SNAP/Food Stamp retailers offer little to no fresh food.² Residents of Auntie Na's neighborhood have no access to fresh produce and, like many in the inner-city, must rely on heavily processed food from the corner markets and liquor stores that dot Detroit. What little is left of public food assistance programs only serve to keep people on the brink of survival. Auntie Na sees that the people of Detroit need community centers, education programs, and local hubs for the production and distribution of healthy food now more than ever.

Many well-intentioned people have worked on establishing such programs in Detroit. Unfortunately, in Auntie Na's experience, these programs often offer services only to certain demographics or on specific conditions, leaving her community largely without support. Most programs fail to engage community members as co-creators and decision-makers, instead perpetuating systems of charity and dependency that often reproduce inequality. ANH has a philosophy insistent on community leadership and education. Its long history at the intersection of food distribution, community care, and youth education has cultivated neighborhood trust. To preserve this work, our Project for Peace will focus on youth empowerment and program sustainability.

Project in Detail

Auntie Na's Peewee Planters Program will pay four high-school-aged youth in her community to develop vocational and leadership skills through work in community placements. For this pilot summer, three of the youth will intern at ANH, assisting with expanding the garden, a tutoring program, and various summer camps and field trips, respectively. The fourth will work for one of the networking partners of ANH, preferably the Georgia Street Community Collective (GSCC), our fiscal sponsor. GSCC was similarly founded in response to community needs and includes an urban farm and meeting space on the East side of Detroit. The Peewee Planters will participate in a series of workshops as part of a Soft Skills Development Program. "Soft" or applied skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving, are critical to becoming an effective employee and manager later in life.³ We will explore these skills in the context of employment and leadership.

¹ <http://www.dignityinschools.org/content/giving-poor-black-children-tragic-case-detroit> <http://dps-vacant-schools.silk.co/page/Detroit%20Transition%20West>

² <http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/ops/Michigan.pdf> / <http://detroitfoodmap.com/>

³ <http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/softskills.pdf>

Four staff members will support these youth: Auntie Na, a Garden Coordinator, and two Project Directors - one of whom is the Oberlin College student applying for this grant. Auntie Na will identify the youth in the program and oversee all projects. The Project Directors will oversee the Soft Skills Development Program, hold regular one-on-one meetings with the Peewee Planters, assist in gardening and construction, and network around the city as needed. We will work with Auntie Na and our partners to identify a Garden Coordinator, who will design the community garden and spend 8 hours a week training volunteers and the assigned Peewee Planter in its maintenance.

The four Peewee Planters are not the only young people included in our youth empowerment focus. The tutoring and field trip programs, each supported by a Peewee Planter, will engage a group of about 10 to 15 younger students per week. We will focus on motivation to learn; attachment and belonging to the learning community we will create; advancement of basic numeracy, literacy, and science skills; and more.⁴ We will construct summer enrichment activities that are relevant and engaging to them in that they are applied to a real-world context and hands-on. We will take time at the beginning of the summer to assess their development and interests and we will reflect constantly as we proceed through the summer.

We intend to explore the long-term sustainability of this program at each stage of the development process. The project is coordinated by a network of organizations and individuals called Auntie Na's Harvesting Unity (ANHU), which is led by Auntie Na and staffed primarily by Oberlin College students. Many of these students are in their first or second year of college and have every intention of continuing this work. Furthermore, one of the Project Directors plans on working full-time for ANH as part of a paid, year-long fellowship program called Repair the World. In terms of financial sustainability, we are now fiscally sponsored by GSCC, which opens future summer programs to a wider array of grant funding and personal contributions. After the summer, the Peewee Planters will remain leaders in their community and will be able to support the increased food service and educational opportunities that we will develop this summer. These young leaders will be integral in planning for the next iteration of this program in the summer of 2017.

Timeline

□ *May*: Identify the Peewee Planters and the Garden Coordinator. Continue ongoing networking initiatives within the city. Develop curricula for the Soft Skills Development, tutoring, and summer camp and field trip programs. Include youth input in this planning process and begin planning for the future of this program after the summer ends. Establish task forces to address foreseeable challenges, such as transportation access and the long-term financial solvency of Auntie Na's Village. Design the garden expansion utilizing permaculture techniques to maximize available space. Utilize college students on alternative spring break trips to prepare the garden and begin planting.

□ *June*: Begin coordinating weekly activities, including garden volunteer hours three times a week, a community meal or barbecue once a week, and regular open pantry hours for donation and distribution. After Detroit Public Schools let out mid-month, the Peewee Planters go through an orientation to the program.

□ *July*: Peewee Planters begin work during the first week and the tutoring and summer camp programs start shortly thereafter. Five days a week, youth from the neighborhood will be invited over to ANH to learn, volunteer, and eat. Each week of the summer camp program will have a different educational theme and field trip.

□ *August*: Continue holding regular volunteer hours, regular meals and distributions, and programming for youth. Close the Peewee Planters Program at the end of the month, organize the finances, and continue planning for the future.

Concluding Comments: Promoting Peace

This program will promote peace by providing inner-city youth with a chance to develop employment and leadership skills over the summer. Furthermore, food insecurity, conflict, and violence are intimately linked to the community circumstances surrounding the participant students, and this project will help alleviate hunger among underserved populations in one of America's poorest and most violent cities.⁵ By developing a community garden, a vibrant and beautiful community center, a food distribution hub, and a youth empowerment program, the negative influences and violence that surround the daily existence of these youth can be dramatically reduced in Auntie Na's neighborhood and replaced with a model of hope and normalcy that struggles to exist today.

⁴ <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/summer-and-extended-learning-time/summer-learning/documents/effective-and-promising-summer-learning-programs.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/harvesting-peace-food-security-conflict-and-cooperation>
<http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/01/26/detr-j26.html> <http://www.forbes.com/sites/danielfisher/2013/10/22/detroit-again-tops-list-of-most-dangerous-cities-but-crime-rate-dips/>