

Reclaiming Black Joy:

A PARK-BASED, CREATIVE
PLACEMAKING INITIATIVE

June-September 2022



a space to be
seen,
celebrated
and feel held



This report offers findings from a project that combined

CULTURE + COMMUNITY + BLACK JOY

Prepared by

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I Am MORE (Making Ourselves Resilient Everyday)

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*Images within this report are generously provided by
I Am MORE, Multnomah County, Elijah Hasan, Deante Grinner,
Marcos Turner, Sean Khoun-Paige, Joe Bean Keller & others.*

Our INTENTIONS

- **Organize a series of once-a-month monthly events in Dawson Park from June to September 2022.**
- **Focus on what we want, not what we don't want (i.e. Black joy vs. anti-gun violence).**
- **Community members of all ages feel safe and seen.**
- **Dawson Park regulars (domino and checkers players) are acknowledged, welcomed and respected.**
- **Black Joy is activated in multiple ways.**
- **At least 80% of event attendees acknowledge or are witnessed having a positive experience.**
- **Collect written and/or videotaped reflections on people's experiences with "Reclaiming Joy" activities.**
- **Increase a sense of Black people's cultural connection to the park and to each other.**

Setting the stage of what is possible...

I remember when I got the call from Charlene McGee, who runs Multnomah County's REACH (Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health) program. She wanted to partner with my organization, I Am MORE LLC, a nationally award-winning, youth-development organization, on a community-based experiment. Charlene wondered: *How can we reclaim Dawson Park, once the hallmark of Portland's tiny and beleaguered Black community, as a safe and welcoming space where Black youth, elders, families and community partners would feel excited to return to celebrate culture and create art.*

This was a tall ask. The 2-acre park had once been a landmark for a thriving and close-knit Black community. But over the years, hundreds of families were displaced by multiple waves of anti-Black government policies and projects. In the absence of a once thriving community, the park increasingly became a popular hangout spot for addicts, dealers, the mentally ill and those who were houseless. Drugs were sold and used openly and, at times, grudges were settled with gunfire.

But, Charlene had a vision and she knew I loved a challenge. As a scholar who specializes in helping Black people heal from racial trauma, I was not discouraged to face what some considered a monumental task. I am also a Creative Revolutionist™ who deeply believes that art - *done from the heart and within community* - can be a magical thread that weaves a nurturing space for connection, inspiration and intentional community building.

Charlene agreed to put together a support team of more than a dozen government and community partners to support the I Am MORE team with planning, permitting, budgeting and community outreach. I Am MORE was responsible for transforming the energy of the park so that both Black youth and elders felt safe. So, we created stations to make art; we organized live music, line dancing and drumming. We hired Black-owned food trucks to serve everyone for free. We recruited hair braiders and barbers, face painters and henna tattoo artists. We passed out free ice cream, kente cloth lanyards and scarves, "Spreading Black Joy" t-shirts, buttons and other giveaways. Together, we focused on what was possible. And, together, we raised hope.



Dr. S. Renee Mitchell
A Visionary HeARTivist

Our dedicated team of partners

Our collaboration included the following partners:

Multnomah County:

- Behavioral Health / Gang Violence Impacted Families / Response Team
- Community and Adolescent Health
- Healthy Birth Initiatives / WIC
- Multnomah County Library
- PATH - Promoting Access to Hope Team
- Public Health
- Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH)

Community partners

- Eliot Neighborhood Association
- Equitable Giving Circle
- Legacy Emanuel Hospital
- Love is Stronger
- Oregon Health & Science University Vaccine Clinic
- PreSERVE Coalition
- The Urban League of Portland
- The Soul Restoration Center
- Twysted Healing Systahs
- Vancouver Avenue First Baptist Church

City of Portland

- Bureau of Transportation
- Parks & Recreation
- Portland Police
- We Are Better Together

Food Vendors

- Black Star Grill
- NE Emergency Food Program
- Papa's Soul Food Kitchen
- Stoopid Burger
- The Mac PDX
- Vera James BBQ
- Beats and Eats

Service Vendors

- Black Food Sovereignty
- CityWide Barbers
- Chillin's Creations (photos/ice cream)
- Corinthia Bethune (face painting)
- Decoding Dyslexia Oregon
- Henna Fixx Artistry
- Love is Stronger
- Mystiques Fancy Faces
- PDX Black Excellence
- Oregon Health & Science University Vaccine Clinic
- PreSERVE Coalition
- United Site Services (portable toilets)
- Urban League of Portland
- Shadow Guard security
- STARS Mentoring
- Tenacious Rose PDX (personal hygiene products, i.e. diapers, self-care items, books, gently used clothes)

Artists/Performers

- Sistahs 4 Life (line dancing)
- LaToya Lovely (visual/performing artist)
- DJ Ambush (music)
- J.W. Friday (emcee)
- Joe Bean Keller (emcee/performer)
- Rain Ezra (singer)
- Tamara Walker (aka F.I.Y.A. - singer)
- Yugen Rashad & band

Multnomah County Chair Deborah Kafoury
with two I Am MORE staff members, Marshall
Goss Jr. (l) and Christina Mitchell (r).



We creatively set the stage for success

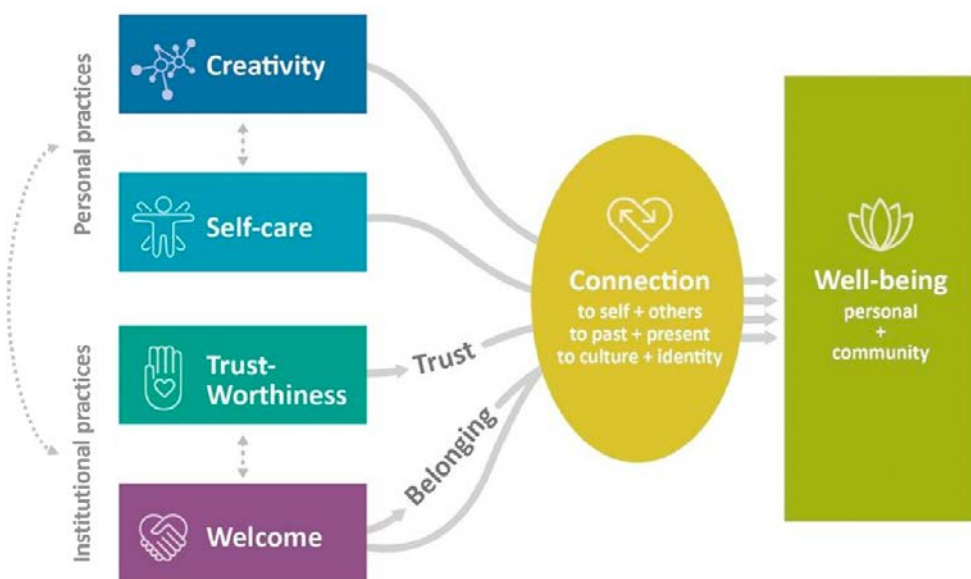
Our team first set a intention to increase our community's well-being by reconnecting them with an outdoor space that the Black community once held dear but no longer spent time in. These "Reclaiming Black Joy" events in Dawson Park, then, needed to be framed as an intentional (re)welcoming, an invitation to heal a subconscious, deep wounding that stems from longing to belong within this park space, and amongst each other as individual members of a shared community. So, even the briefest of interactions with our staff, our community partners, and amongst community members needed to inspire a positive feeling that could engender a sense of belonging, which could then contribute toward individual and community healing, and a feeling of emotional and physical safety.

So, our first step was to offer easy access to opportunities that would inspire individuals to want to connect, and also create. Creativity can help facilitate the imagination of new possibilities and build trust to lean upon one's intuition and ancestral genius. This inner journey, which is critical to social change, can lead toward healing of self and others through positive connections. We knew that if we intentionally presented these social opportunities, they could increase well-being on a personal and community level by connecting individuals to each other, and to the cultural threads that help us feel whole.

When our team met for planning meetings, for example, we would start and end our conversations with a grounding exercise that required each of us to take a moment to reflect and share one's inner self with each other.

This small exercise helped build camaraderie and trust and indicated that we valued relationship-building as a form of well-being, individually and collectively. Since the COVID pandemic, the need for self-care has become even more essential to increasing one's mental health. And one can accomplish that through sharing environments with like-minded people whom one considers to be peaceful and trustworthy.

We intended to replicate that conscious connection between creativity, self-care and well-being within the activities we offered in Dawson Park. We needed to create a welcoming environment that positively and colorfully reflected our culture. We needed to infuse Black joy in memorable ways so that the community could trust our intentions. And we need to make sure people were connecting with each other and feeling like they belonged, which could be healing for one's mental/emotional health.



Why do we need to reclaim our joy?



We asked this question above on an optional evaluation survey, here are the answers:

- Because we live in a place that constantly drains us
- I'm not sure
- Because it's ours to have
- Make the world a better place
- To continue our culture and not lose it
- Unity
- For the becoming of our true self
- To grow to live to thrive
- Because it has been taken from us
- Because we've been assisting other communities so much we need to take time for ourselves.
- Because our culture is our history and future
- Because it was stolen from us
- Celebrate all the great things about black community
- Good for our health
- Joy is life & without joy, life is meaningless
- We need to find it everywhere
- We need it
- Better black supporting community
- Because happiness is important
- Because we cannot teach our children to be proud of their heritage if we don't embrace it /celebrate it
- Remember where we come from to know where we're going
- For the children
- Because we need to understand what we have
- Violence & Racism has snatched it
- By staying connected to the neighborhood
- To restore wholeness in community
- Because it has gotten lost in our society
- Because Black people have been through a lot and we should celebrate ourselves
- We need to reclaim our neighborhood
- It's essential to peace of mind
- Peace
- Good for community

We (re)affirmed cultural pride



In order to make a clear statement that our Dawson Park events were intentionally celebrating Black culture, we decorated the poles, vendor tents and tables with Kente cloth, mudcloth and other ethnic patterns. We also passed out more than 400 Kente cloth scarves and lanyards to all the Black people who showed up. We not only wanted the attendees to have souvenirs of their experience at the park, but we also intended to create a visual reminder that we are proud of Black culture, and that we belong in Dawson Park, and deserve to take up space in the only neighborhood, at one time, where Blacks were only allowed to live because of racial discrimination.

These giveaways symbolized a connection to our collective past and present, and to our ethnic identity as Black people. They also were a visual reminder of our presence, despite living in a place where the Black population is so tiny that, according to The New York Times and the The Oregonian newspapers, Portland is considered the whitest urban city in the United States.

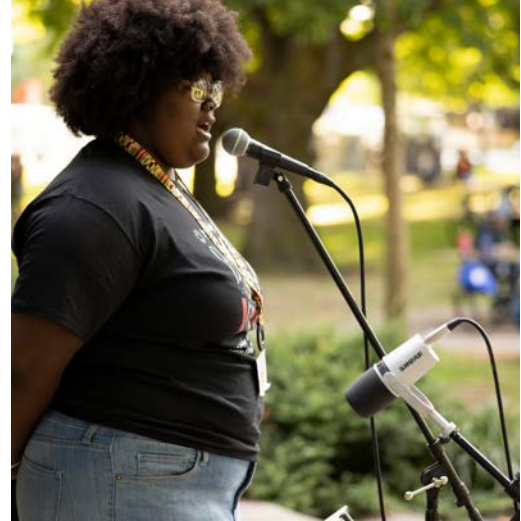


Another way that we celebrated culture is by purposefully acknowledging the presence of those who regularly played dominoes and checkers in the park. As soon as we entered, we verbally greeted them, as we wanted to intentionally confirm their humanity and welcome their presence. We also purchased and distributed custom-made domino sets.

We involved youth in our process



I Am MORE youth volunteers were given lanyards that read: "Ask Me! I am here to help! As I Am MORE is committed to investing in the already existing genius within Black youth, we regularly put them into situations or created opportunities to stretch and challenged them, while also building leadership skills and inner confidence.



As part of our regular programming, when youth identify what interests them, we create ways to lean into and expand their creative genius, whether that's reciting poetry, singing, making music, drumming, using professional camera equipment or just lending a hand to help someone.



We inspired others to step up



All told, I Am MORE youth dedicated dozens of hours to help with the Dawson Park gatherings, setting up, serving elders, breaking down tents and tables, and handing out water, food and other giveaways. Their presence made a huge difference. Some of the young helpers also supported a similar gathering in East County in October.

What's more, some of the park regulars - who all received Black Joy t-shirts and other giveaways - normally stayed crowded around domino and chess games on the outskirts of the park during other events. But they offered to carry items, stack chairs and help out more.

This demonstrated to us how much the park regulars felt included in the rest of our activities. Once they felt a sense of non-judgmental acceptance, their actions spoke louder than any words. They showed us that we were part of their community, too, and we were welcomed there, now and in the future.

One former park regular commented that he witnessed people in the park proudly wearing their Black Joy t-shirts in the community. He also noted that, out of respect for us, the fist fights and shouting matches that would regularly occur between people with years-old grudges never surfaced during our events.

(A handwritten note we received after our last Dawson event in September):



It is a beautiful thing for children to have opportunities to serve. Three of my four children attended the Dawson Park [Reclaiming Black Joy] end-of-summer gathering last week. My 13-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter worked to set up and break down the event, they took pictures, they engaged and listened throughout the evening, and they had so much fun. My youngest seven-year-old mostly enjoyed playing on the playground, having my full attention and music and beautiful people all around.

Single parenting without family nearby has its challenges. Getting my youngest to do his chores and help around the house is often hard. I was moved to hear him, past his bedtime at the end of the night saying "How else can I help? What else can I do?" He had picked up trash, he folded napkins, he helped count tablecloths he moved things, and organized things, and he felt a part of something. It truly takes a village to raise a family.

Children need role models outside of the home that inspires and encourage them to want to contribute to the world that needs our participation. We are meant to love and serve and utilize our gifts and uplift each other. We are not meant to do all of this alone. I feel so blessed to have found The Soul Restoration Center / I Am MORE resilient project. They've earned my trust, support, and appreciation. Grateful you're here and looking forward to all that is to come.

We honored Black elders



“
**Thank you Dr. Renee and
community partners for
bringing Black Joy to the
beloved community! The
ancestors would be pleased.**

Antoinette Edwards
Community elder



We activated Black Joy



We gave away 500+ of our "Spreading The Black Joy Virus" t-shirts (S-4X). The giveaways were intended to encourage others to share Black Joy person to person, as a means to counteract the collective trauma of racism and the COVID pandemic. Later, we witnessed people wearing their shirts in the community. Even the security team, who was not at all happy with our request to be less conspicuous by wearing one of our t-shirts and a security hat, later acknowledged that they had never seen an event at Dawson Park go as smoothly as ours had. Also, a community worker who was an anti-gang violence advocate commented to an organizer that "even the air in the park is lighter."

From the beginning, our planning team believed in what was possible when we decided to focus on joy.



We danced our troubles away



I bought my mom and she said it was the most fun she's had in Portland to date.

Jessica Morkert-Shibley

At each event, the Sistas4Life dance group helped teach women, men and children some simple dance moves to get people out of their seats. The community-building strategy had strangers having fun and laughing while exercising, too.



We fed our community well



We served about 1,800 meals at our "Reclaiming Joy" events, and by offering multiple options, we infused dignity into the distribution process. At one point, though, we realized, that many of our volunteers were too busy to leave their tents and wait in line for food. So, we checked in with our resourceful community advocates and were able to get 200 bowls of seasoned rice, beans and greens, (which came from a Portland-based, Black-owned farm). To include additional healthy food options, our partners also distributed single servings of salad and dressing. It was such a delight to witness the way that resources emerged to address the community's request for healthier choices. In addition, by participating in these events,

some of the Black-owned food trucks were added to a preferred vendor list that gives them access to future opportunities from our government partners. Some food vendors also started offering healthier options on their menus as a standard practice.



We want to ensure that healing communities have healthy children, healthy families and Black-owned businesses."

**Deborah Kafoury
Multnomah County Chair**



We served the community's needs



We made everyone feel welcome



“
Dawson Park was
alive with Black Joy!
Happy I was able to be
a part of each event.

Paul Knauls Sr.
Honorary Mayor
of NE Portland



We celebrated just being together



Our Black elders opened each "Reclaiming Joy" event with a special welcome and community greeting. Elder Mariah Taylor attended every event, often waiting until the end to collect leftover food to distribute to the houseless living under bridges. Even on a day she was released from the hospital, she made her way to Dawson Park to listen to Yugen Rashad (I)



and his band, with special guest, saxophonist Eldon T. Jones.. "It was more than worth it," Mariah said. At the September event, elders



Joe Bean Keller and Paul Knauls surprised Mariah by wishing her a happy 83rd birthday.



Joe Bean Keller attended every Dawson Park event, and also used his truck to help us clean up. He emceed two events and played with his live band at the August event.



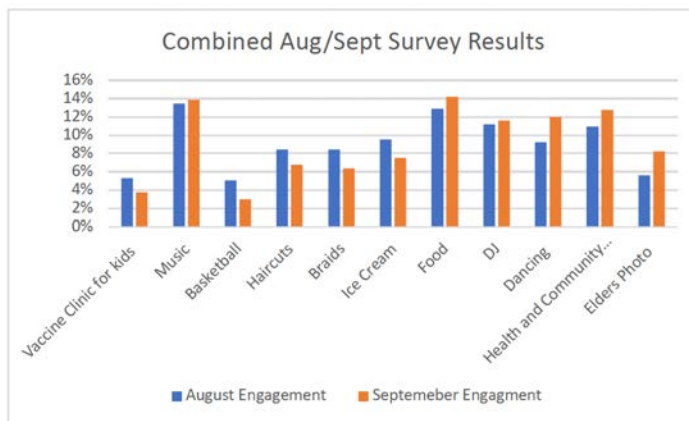
Multimedia artist and dancer LaToya Lovely performed a solo interpretive dance on the large circular lawn at the June event. Cars parked on the sides of the park ended up turning down their music to show respect for her performance. And LaToya danced without music and only the sound of the wind.



What a time of joy, laughing, sharing, and being together as one, regardless of the age, size, shape, ethnicity, culture, or socioeconomic group that one would identify with. We were all as one, united to reclaim our Black Joy and share the leftovers of hot mac and cheese with those under the bridges and on the streets after the event was over.

Mariah Taylor
Community elder

We had a variety of ways that people who attended can engage in the activities. Here are the survey results of how those who attended our last two "Reclaiming Joy" events enjoyed spending their time the most.



We stepped in & up to claim joy



During the kickoff event in June, soft, colorful, swimming pool noodles that spelled the word "JOY" filled the center of the park's grassy area, surrounded by tents and vendor tables. At one point, attendees were summoned to the noodles to literally "step in" to their joy. Even those using wheelchairs and walkers were supported to join, while an aerial drone several feet in the air captured the moment. For the September event, attendees collectively formed a heart.



"It's empowering, and it's inspiring to see our community step into action and joy. As people, we hold the answer to educating, healing, empowering and so much more. When I reflect on what it means to be part of the Black community, we have been known for not just focusing on taking care of just ourselves; we are known for taking care of others. And that's what this is about tonight. It's about reclaiming the narrative."

Ebony Clarke
Multnomah County Health
Department Director

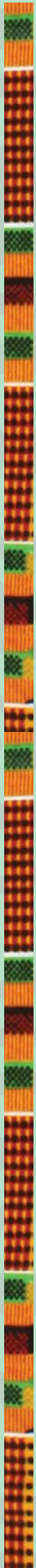


What did you enjoy most?



We asked this question above on an optional evaluation survey, here are the answers:

- Community-Food-Music
- I enjoyed everything
- Coming together
- Music and sense of community
- Community-Culture-Music-Art
- Unity
- Energy-Food-Music-Info
- Good energy-Black people
- Being surrounded by my community
- Vendors - music - food
- Networking
- The togetherness
- Range of groups; colorful tables
- Enjoyed seeing the people
- Music & community
- Everyone coming together
- Seeing beautiful Black people
- Music, T-shirts
- Togetherness
- Everything and how we came together
- Resources
- Music
- Food
- Speaker, poem, face painting
- Seeing everybody come together
- Very nice lots of health information
- Community
- Vibes
- Music, community
- The dancing
- To be able to enjoy yourself

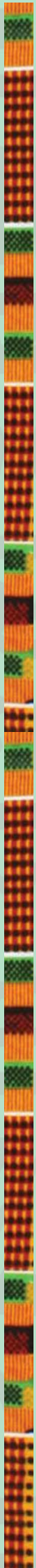


What can we do to maintain joy?



We asked this question above on an optional evaluation survey, here are the answers:

- Find spaces that we can meet each other
- Keep doing what we've been doing
- Show it
- Music
- Everything
- Community-Culture-Music-Art
- More of the movement that spreads joy
- Community-Family
- Be together
- Participate in self-care activities
- Keep having events
- Give God the glory
- Improving as a community
- Opportunities to gather & relax
- Get our needs met in healthy ways
- Stay together
- Continue this!
- Continue to practice and do what we love
- Serve one another
- Consistently showing up
- Pray
- Love one another
- Dance, Commune, Eat
- Keep opening the park's information
- By doing things that bring you joy!
- Live life carefree
- Taking time & (rest) & connecting
- Do things that we love and be around loved ones
- Live in the moment
- Consistent events
- More events
- Come together as a community
- Keep doing what ya'll doing



Anything else to add?



We asked this question above on an optional evaluation survey, here are the answers:

- **Thank you, Friend!!! (Heart)**
- **Keep it up**
- **Sharing Community + Joy**
- **Make the world a Better Place to Live**
- **Just so happy to have this time together (heart)**
- **Have info # on the tent and a sheet with those on it- (needed direction)**
- **Thank you! Hope this event continues!**
- **Awesome evening!**
- **I love seeing Blacks at positive empowering events**
- **Thank you for this event**
- **No, Keep the good work you are doing**
- **Wonderful event w/great resources for the community.**
- **No, this event is wonderful!**
- **So grateful that these events have happened & I've been able to experience this!**
- **Keep doing this**
- **Sharing & caring**
- **Cards, spades, bid wiz, chess, checkers**
- **Love one another and all around you**
- **It was too much fun - enjoyed myself**
- **More.more.more...the kente cloths on the tables!!**
- **Friendly people. Family, People I haven't seen in years**
- **Kool**
- **I feel honored to participate in this RTBJ celebration**
- **Awesome event, thank you!**
- **I liked the event maybe next time more kids' activities**
- **This is very good to bring awareness to the area**
- **No. Love it**
- **Thank you**
- **We love it! Good day**
- **Thank you**

CONCLUSION: *Intentionally using culture, joy and creativity can transform a neglected and sometimes dangerous place into a welcoming, nurturing and inspiring environment that makes people feel seen, heard and cared about.*

We met our intended outcomes



Focus on the positives

As the formerly Black neighborhood became more gentrified and hundreds of houses, businesses and other structures were demolished as part of a so-called urban renewal strategy, the park became less and less safe. The gazebo, formed from a cupola that was salvaged 50+ years ago became a symbol of the Black community's endurance. "Reclaiming Joy" activities in the park focused on the things that unite, inspire, affirm and contribute to healing from decades of government-endorsed racial trauma.



Respect, honor and affirm all who attended

Of those who responded to our evaluative survey, 100% had a positive experience. The responses provided a wealth of heart-felt reflections, some of which were also posted on individual's social media. The presence of Black elders, some of whom attended each event, particularly reflected that they felt safe, affirmed and that their presence was appreciated. And at each event, we had various different elders offer an official welcome.



Offer a diversity of options

Not everyone will like the same types of food, music or activities. The more options, the more choices people will have to partake in the festivities. When you center social justice as a practice, you embrace a participatory democracy that offers a culture shift, which enlivens community life, acknowledges cultural customs, and values different ways of expression, gathering, participating and communicating.



Be intentional placekeepers

Social justice advocates are increasingly preferring the term "creative placekeeping" over "creative placemaking," because "placekeeping" is an acknowledgment that gentrification has led to racially biased displacement. More transformative, vibrant community spaces - like "Reclaiming Black Joy" events - are needed to honor people who were forced out of their neighborhoods because of gentrification and racially biased practices.



Raise hope to build resiliency

Engaging the media to share news about the "Reclaiming Joy" events led to more awareness about the intention of the project and its intended goals to harness arts and creativity to increase Black joy, healing and community empowerment. Leveraging access to information can inform and inspire others' social imaginations, and expand possibilities of scaling up a potential culture shift that potentially empowers others to join, as well.



Sharing the deeper lessons that we learned



1

People process trauma more effectively when they are focused on joy. But, joy is harder to find when one is hungry. So, consider their needs and meet people where they are.

2

It takes social imagination & intentionality to shape an authentic atmosphere of empathy and belonging, where everyone is considered, including those typically ignored.

3

Find community advocates who can vouch for your credibility until you can earn it for yourself. This creates new narratives of power sharing, and scales up belonging.

4

Black people heal most effectively within relationship with others in their racial community. So, create a variety of options that encourage collaboration, which leverages joy activation.

5

Small gestures of kindness can have a big effect on inspiring someone to show up as whole humans, i.e., as creators, leaders and contributors, not merely as consumers.

6


Some white people will be uncomfortable when Black people are being centered and may try to prioritize their needs over those in the Black community. But, stay grounded in purpose.

7

Weaving a larger social fabric begins with deepening one's own connection to what personally grounds you, so one is inspired to expand his/her capacity for caring & reciprocity.

8

When you engage community in a participatory way, leave them with something to hold onto, to remember, and to build from that scales up their individual connection to hope and healing.



"Together" (a poem)

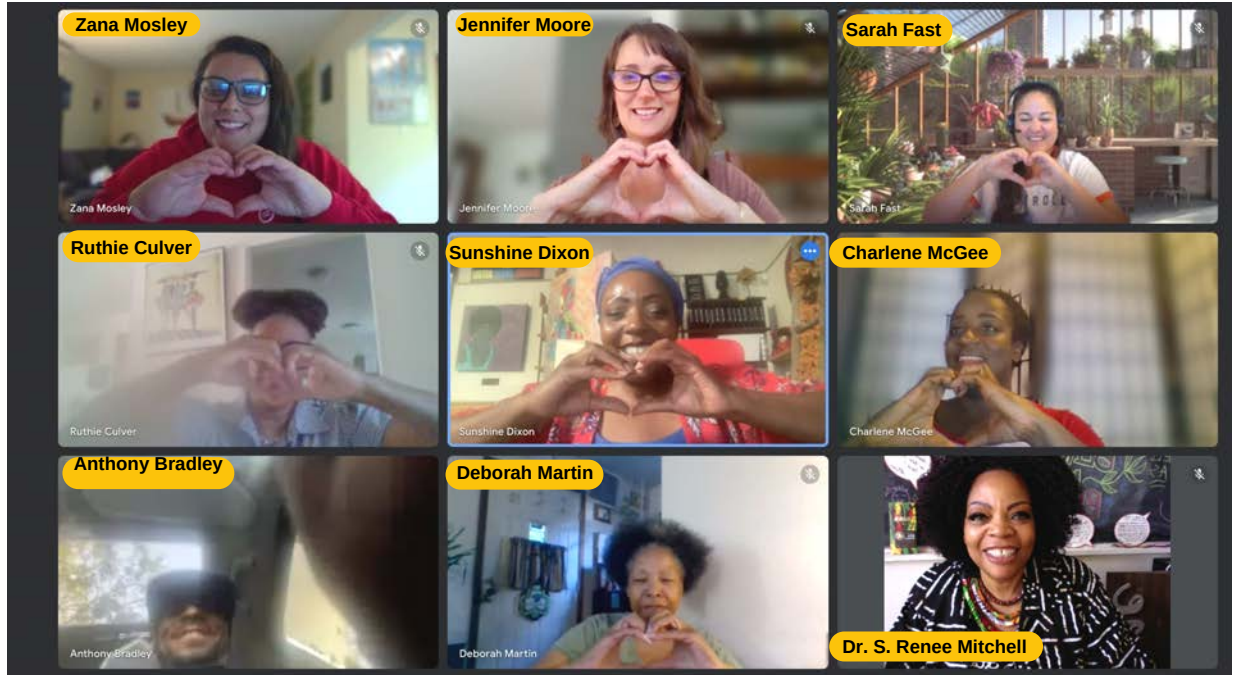
in honor of the planning team who believed in what was possible



Kamesha Robinson



Stephanie Blume



we committed to a mission
 to create space for Black joy
 hope laughter creativity
 it is not hard to see what had been
 but it takes courage
 to (re)imagine what could be
 to nurture possibilities in an environment
 where so many felt
 overlooked / dismissed / unseen
 instead of now-gentrified status quo
 we opened our arms
 parked food trucks
 had dominoes specially made
 offered cold water
 designed opportunities to celebrate artistic genius
 encouraged people to have their faces painted
 reflect African culture everywhere they looked
 eat healthy food
 that fed their bellies
 and their longing
 to be cared for
 cared about
 be a part of something magical
 we loved on and honored our elders
 created space to dance til our hips hurt
 but still took time to inspire others
 to turn up / look up / and collectively
 feel the sun on our endarkened skin
 & experience embodied joy once again

we inspired our Black community
 to (re)member, (re)member, (re)member
 how much we had desperately missed
 being TOGETHER
 we made love visible
 genuine and palatable
 we lifted up / and raised up
 we gathered up / and gave away
 we captured smiles
 and held space
 for hugs / laughter / new memories
 a (re)claiming of what once was
 a soul healing
 we (re)embraced ancestral resilience
 reminded former neighbors of faces they hadn't seen
 touch they had been starved of
 and of kindness they hadn't witnessed
 since grandma's smell still lingered
 we spread Black joy
 because that's what we deserve
 that's what we were displaced from
 that is what we had longed for
 for so long that we had forgotten the key
 but because our team
 trusted in and were anchored by Black joy
 our community also (re)discovered the tune
 and we joined hands
 and sang it
 TOGETHER

A poem written by Dr. S. Renee Mitchell

