



40 ACRE CO-OP: REVIVING BLACK AGRICULTURAL LEGACY

The 40 Acre Co-op is a national cooperative founded by Angela Dawson, a fourth-generation farmer who recognized both the challenges and possibilities facing Black farmers in the 21st century. Its name is a deliberate reference to the unfulfilled promise of “40 acres and a mule” made to formerly enslaved people after the Civil War—a promise broken by the federal government. In reclaiming this history, the 40 Acre Co-op positions itself as a modern response to centuries of dispossession and exclusion.

The cooperative’s mission is to empower socially disadvantaged farmers, particularly Black farmers, by giving them access to training, resources, and collective markets. It acknowledges that Black farmers have endured systemic racism in lending, policy, and land access for generations, and that any solution must be both economic and historical. By working cooperatively, the 40 Acre Co-op builds power not just for individual farmers but for entire communities.

Programs include training sessions, technical assistance, and consulting led by agricultural

experts. The co-op also provides entry points for new farmers who want to start but face barriers of land access and financing. Membership opportunities are open to farmers, investors, and community supporters, building a diverse network of solidarity.

One of the most innovative aspects of the co-op is its focus on hemp and CBD production. By cultivating hemp, members are able to diversify income streams and tap into growing markets, all while practicing sustainable agriculture. Hemp is also a way for farmers to reclaim autonomy in a system that often leaves them dependent on unstable commodity markets.

The co-op’s work is not only practical but symbolic. It restores dignity and legacy to Black farming, reminding members that agriculture is not just about survival but about wealth building and community care. It is about reclaiming the economic independence that was systematically denied after emancipation.



How does the 40 Acre Co-op challenge traditional agricultural models, and what can its approach teach us about building racial equity in food systems?

Courtesy of fortyacre.coop



COOPERATION JACKSON

“As a model, what it means is a group of individuals come together, they pool their resources to start a small business or a large-scale business, depending on how many come together, but they pool their resources, number one, together. And then they create a democratic structure by which they manage the enterprises together. So there’s no boss, other than themselves, acting collectively, telling them what to do, what their hours are, you know, what their working conditions are. These are things that they determine themselves. That’s the central, core component of it. It’s collective ownership and collective decision-making that makes it a real workers’ cooperative.” — Kali Akuno

- ❏ What do you think are some of the fundamental challenges that people face in coming together to create workers’ cooperatives?
- ❏ How would you describe the principles guiding conventional businesses? Do you think the workers’ cooperative model presents an alternative, and how?

Courtesy of [Cooperation Jackson](#)



COMBAHEE RIVER COLONY

“The Combahee River Colony was located in a remote area where African Americans established their own settlements and remained relatively self-sufficient and semi-autonomous: the Gullah/Geechee communities in the South Carolina Sea Islands. The Combahee River Colony in South Carolina consisted of several hundred African American women during the Civil War whose men had gone to join the Union Army. They occupied abandoned farmland where they 'grew crops and cared for one another.' They refused to work for Whites and were proud of their handicrafts and cotton crop, as well as their independence. The community became relatively well known as an example of Black women’s independence, perseverance, and collective spirit.”



What strikes you most about this history?

Excerpt from Jessica Gordon Nembhard’s Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice





BLACK PANTHER PARTY SURVIVAL PROGRAMS

"You don't read about the survival programs we are doing for the people, the free children's breakfast program, trying to feed some of these hungry kids before they go off to school in the morning. The educational programs we had going on for these kids, for the older folks as well. You don't read about that. The shoe giveaway, the clothing giveaway, the coat giveaway we had going on back east so these people don't freeze to death during the winter months. The free prison busing program, where we bused people from the community out to the prison, the penitentiary, so the people can visit their loved ones who are incarcerated. You don't read about that. You don't read about the free ambulance service that we had going on in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, because

Black people in Winston-Salem were denied basic emergency health care. You don't read about that. You don't read about the free sickle cell anemia testing program where we tested over 500,000, half a million people, before the U.S. government even realized that sickle cell anemia was a threat to the well-being of Black people in America. You don't read about that. Why? Because there's no sensationalism there, no dramatic value, it doesn't sell newspapers, it doesn't boost the television ratings. It's just some Black people getting organized to help some other Black people."



Do you relate to how Smith talks about media coverage of Black communities? Why or why not?

Roger Guenveur Smith, co-director of PBS' A Huey P. Newton Story

LIST OF BLACK PANTHER PARTY SURVIVAL PROGRAMS

An abbreviated list of the Black Panther Party Community Programs, courtesy of the Black Panther Party Research Project at Stanford University.

1966 - 1982

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Alameda County Volunteer Bureau Work Site | 20. Free Dental Program |
| 2. Benefit Counseling | 21. Free Employment Program |
| 3. Black Student Alliance | 22. Free Food Program |
| 4. Child Development Center | 23. Free Film Series |
| 5. Consumer Education Classes | 24. Free Furniture Program |
| 6. Community Facility Use | 25. Free Health Clinics |
| 7. Community Health Classes | 26. Free Housing Cooperative Program |
| 8. East Oakland CIL (Center for Independent Living) Branch | 27. Food Cooperative Program |
| 9. Community Pantry (Free Food Program) | 28. Free Optometry Program |
| 10. Drug/Alcohol Abuse Awareness Program | 29. Community Forum |
| 11. Drama Classes | 30. Free Pest Control Program |
| 12. Disabled Persons Services/Transportation and Attendant | 31. Free Plumbing and Maintenance Program |
| 13. Drill Team | 32. Free Shoe Program |
| 14. Employment Referral Service | 33. GED Classes |
| 15. Free Ambulance Program | 34. Geriatric Health Center |
| 16. Free Breakfast for Children Programs | 35. GYN Clinic |
| 17. Free Busing to Prisons Program | 36. Home SAFE Visits |
| 18. Free Clothing Program | 37. Intercommunal Youth Institute (becomes OCS by 1975) |
| 19. Free Commissary for Prisoners Program | 38. Junior and High School Tutorial Program |
| | 39. Legal Aid and Education |
| | 40. Legal Clinic/Workshops |

THIS LIST INCLUDES 25 MORE PROGRAMS



What comes to your mind when you see this list? (Keep in mind there are at least 25 more community programs!)



Why did the Black Panthers operate these Survival Programs?





COOPERATIVE EL GUABO

In 1998, 14 small-scale banana farmers in southwest Ecuador decided to take the tremendous risk of sending one container (about 38,400 lbs) of bananas to Europe with the hope of selling it directly to a supermarket. By cutting out the middleman, they took the power back into their own hands. With the sale of this first container, the El Guabo Association of Small Banana Producers was born. The entrepreneurs transformed themselves from individual, marginalized growers into a democratically run organization with access to the international market.

Today, El Guabo is a farmer-run cooperative with 350 small-scale banana farmers. Each

farmer is committed to improving quality of life for themselves and their communities. In addition to earning a fair price for their bananas, the co-op receives an additional \$1 per case (approx. 40 lbs of bananas) as a Fair Trade social premium. El Guabo's members voted to spend the premium on education, health care, retirement, environmental projects and infrastructure improvements. Additionally, El Guabo is giving back to the local and global community by sharing their highly successful cooperative model with other producer groups in Ecuador and throughout the world.



What risks do you think you may need to take, individually or collectively, in your cooperative efforts?

Courtesy of Equal Exchange



FANNIE LOU HAMER

FREEDOM FARM COOPERATIVE

"I know what the pain of hunger is about," Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer told a crowd in Madison, Wisconsin. "My family was some of the poorest people that was in the state of Mississippi...we were sharecroppers."

In 1969, Mrs. Hamer founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative with a \$8,000 down payment that she was able to fundraise through generous donations. The former sharecropper purchased 40 acres of prime Delta land.

"She then set up a 'pig bank' with the help of the National Council of Negro Women, which donated fifty pigs. The bank loaned pregnant pigs to poor families, who could keep the 'dividends,' in the form of piglets, and return the original pig to the bank. When the first pigs from the litter became pregnant, the family would donate them to another family. By 1973, three hundred families had almost three thousand new pigs." (The Color of Wealth, p. 102)

It was her attempt to empower poor Black farmers and sharecroppers, who, for generations, had been at the mercy of the local white landowners. "The time has come now when we are going to have to get what we need ourselves. We may get a little help, here and there, but in the main we're going to have to do it ourselves," she explained.

She worked tirelessly to develop the Freedom Farm Cooperative. The cost of membership for the co-op was \$1 a month. But even at that price, only 30 families could afford membership dues; another 1,500 families belonged to the Freedom Farm in name. The co-op planted cash crops like soybeans and cotton to pay taxes and administrative expenses. The rest of the land was sowed with vegetables, like cucumbers, peas, beans, squash, and collard greens, all of which was distributed back to those who worked on the co-op.



If, like Fannie Lou Hamer said, "we may get a little help here and there," what kind of help do you value getting?

FEDERATION OF SOUTHERN COOPERATIVES

In 1967, 22 cooperatives, which were an outgrowth of the civil rights movement, came together at Atlanta University to form a “federation” of cooperatives. The people and groups that met that spring wanted to unite and create organization that would lead its members to greater access to the information, services and resources that they had been systematically denied.

The Federation came out of the South where economic exploitation and racial discrimination were patterns of everyday life. The reality was that low-income rural communities in the South were being left behind in the civil rights movement that was sweeping across the country in the 1960s.

The organization has provided services, learning and leadership experiences, saved family estates, reduced debts, increased revenues and enhanced stability for its members through producer, marketing, consumer and credit cooperatives. It has also taught techniques and skills that are of incalculable worth.

- 🔄 Why do you think land is so important to this group?
- 🔄 What “techniques and skills of incalculable worth” do you think the Federation helped cultivate?



www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KMnzgfkUKfg



FREEDOM QUILTING BEE

The Freedom Quilting Bee was a quilting cooperative established in 1966 by a group of African American women in the community of Rehoboth, 46 miles from Selma, in Wilcox County.

The Freedom Quilting Bee was born in the civil rights movement as a way for poor Black craftswomen in the Alabama Black Belt to earn money for their families. Most of the members rallied for voting rights in the Selma-to-Montgomery March, or in Camden, the Wilcox County seat. Despite the passage of civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965, a direct outcome of the Selma march, the region remained in turmoil.

Freedom Quilting Bee was born in March 1966 as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement as a beacon of hope, a battle for economic survival and a quest for dignity.

In 1966, local Black people in Wilcox County, Alabama were being evicted from their homes, losing their jobs, and having their home loans foreclosed by the banks after registering to vote—or even being seen at a voting rights demonstration. An Episcopal priest and civil rights worker named Father Francis X. Walter was in the area to record the facts of these crimes and send the data to the FBI for prosecution under the newly enacted civil rights legislation.

However, as he told author Nancy Callahan in her book *The Freedom Quilting Bee—Folk Art and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama*, “The FBI did nothing. The federal government prosecuted no one.”

Meanwhile, as he traveled the area, he saw the many beautiful and unique quilts local women had created hanging on clotheslines in the area. He believed there was economic potential to these functional works of art. So, with the help of Father Walter, many volunteers and the strong leadership of Estelle Witherspoon, the Bee’s first president, Freedom Quilting Bee was established. The artistry of the women, the unique expression of the quilts, and the stray materials used to create them, caught the attention of many far beyond Alberta and Wilcox County.

FQB Grows Sales Exponentially with Manufacturing Contracts

Beginning in 1969, the Bee landed small contracts with New York department stores Saks

On January 9, 1970, New Communities secured ownership of 3,000 acres of farmland and 2,000 acres of woodland. It was at that time the largest tract of land owned by

Fifth Avenue and Bonwit Teller. In order to provide the consistency and quality the stores needed, the quilters changed their product. Rather than full-size quilts, they began making baby quilts, useful for baby beds, wall hangings, small tablecloths and picnic blankets. The pattern chosen was the Coat of Many Colors, which had been a staple of the Wilcox quilters for a century and a half. For the Black women, the design was in memory of the biblical Joseph, who had been given a coat of many colors that caused him to be cast into Egypt, where he faced many trials as difficult as their own.

Monumental Quilt

In 1970, the artists of the FQB were asked to create a monumental quilt—44 feet by 20 feet—for the Festival of Folkways celebration in Texas. The quilt was hung on the outside of a popular upscale department store in Houston.

Sears, Roebuck Comes Calling

Looking for ways to diversify and increase production and profits, the women turned to corduroy pillow shams, and Sears liked what they saw. The Bee landed a contract with Sears in 1972. During their busiest time, the women produced 30,000 shams every six months, 5,000 a month, and 200 a day. In 1980, the Bee did \$7,500 in business, \$5,100 of which was from Sears. By 1982, sales had increase to \$200,000, the majority of which was sales to Sears.

Not only was FQB's work prized by Sears and its customers, but art collectors and artists such as Diana Vreeland, Jackson Pollack and Lee Krasner acquired individual full-size quilts as works of art.

Between the Sears contract and the attention of collectors, the quilters were able to provide for their families, express their personal artistic visions and gain the pride of accomplishment.

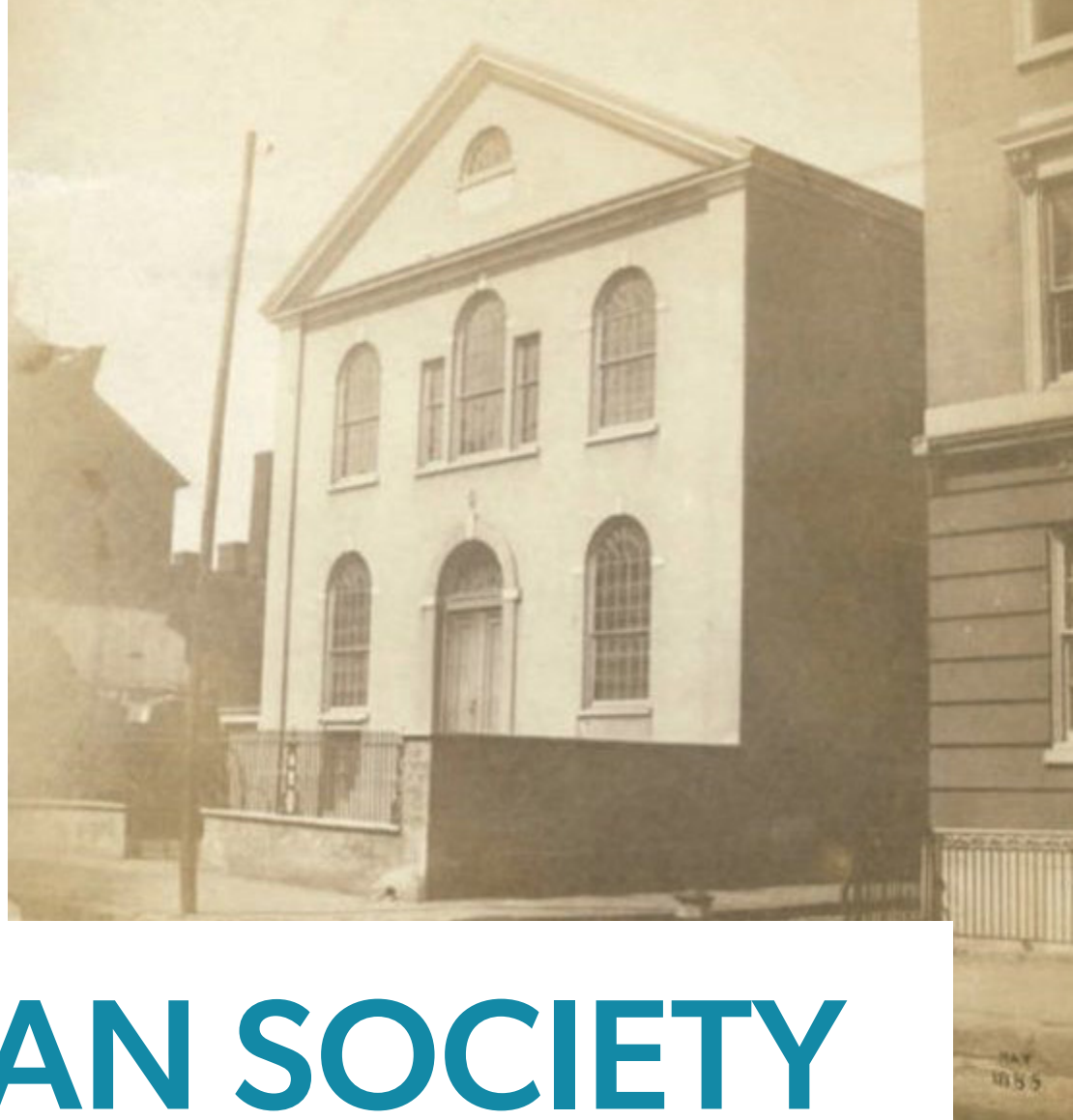
In fact, as noted by author Callahan, "The first two years in the life of the Freedom Quilting Bee, 1966 and 1967, were amazing in terms of job orders and volunteer energies. Between its founding in March 1966, and the end of the calendar year, the co-op provided \$5,500 in profits to its members, amassed mostly from the sale of \$20 and \$25 quilts...the co-op raised family income for some by as much as 25% "in just its first 10 months.

Today, quilts from the artists of Freedom Quilting Bee are exhibited in museums across the globe and are highly prized by collectors, going for thousands of dollars. Although FQB went strong for more than two decades, it didn't survive into the 21st century, allowing the history, stories, innovation and incredible courage and accomplishments of a group of determined Black women artisans to all but disappear. Our new organization, Freedom Quilting Bee Legacy, was created to right that wrong.



How can we continue our cultural traditions such as quilting and their legacy in Black cooperative work today?





FREE AFRICAN SOCIETY

Headed by Black founding fathers Richard Allen (1760-1831) and Absalom Jones (1746-1818), the Free African Society was founded on April 12, 1787, as a nondenominational mutual aid society and the first dedicated to serving Philadelphia's burgeoning free Black community. Members contributed one shilling per month to fund programs to support their social and economic needs.

Members in good standing could expect a number of benefits from the mutual aid fund. Particularly in the first years of the society, important aspects of support for members included payments for burials and providing financial aid for widows and other family members of the deceased, finding apprenticeships

for children to learn a trade, and paying tuition for members' children if places in free schools were not available. Over time, the society expanded to care for the social and economic well-being of its members by providing moral guidance, by helping newcomers to the city feel welcome, and by giving assistance during periods of financial difficulty brought on by unemployment or sickness. The society also took on the task of assisting the sick during the yellow fever epidemic in 1793. Members nursed the sick, dug graves and buried the dead, and transported the ill to quarters outside of the city where they could be quarantined and given medical aid.



NATIONAL TRAINING SCHOOL FOR WOMEN & GIRLS

NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS

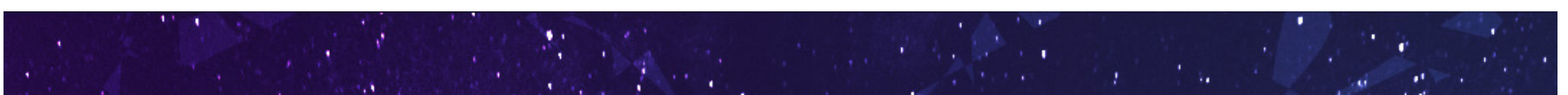
“Anything that is as old as racism is in the blood line of the nation. It's not any superficial thing—that attitude is in the blood and we have to educate about it.”

— Nannie Helen Burroughs

Burroughs believed in the ideology of self-help, which urged Black Americans to establish and support the growth of their own institutions, despite the severe limitations imposed upon them by segregation and discrimination... Establishing a self-sufficient school for Black women was not the only way in which Burroughs pioneered. During the depression, she organized a self-help cooperative in the northeast Washington community, which provided facilities, without charge, for a medical clinic, a variety store, farming, canning, and hairdressing. The project, later called Cooperative Industries, Inc., became a permanent establishment managed by Burroughs.

-  Nannie Helen Burroughs was an educator and a cooperative developer, among other roles. What do you feel is the relationship between education and cooperatives?
-  What risks do you think you may need to take, individually or collectively, in your cooperative efforts?

Excerpt from Notable American Women: The Modern Period: A Biographical Dictionary





NEW COMMUNITIES, INC.

In June 1968, former SNCC Southwest Georgia project director Charles Sherrod and six others traveled to Israel to study the kibbutz system of land trusts. When the group returned, they convened a meeting in Atlanta with representatives from a dozen civil rights organizations. Their goal was to establish cooperative farming and homestead leases in the American South. By 1969, New Communities Inc., the largest Black-owned farm cooperative in the United States, was founded.

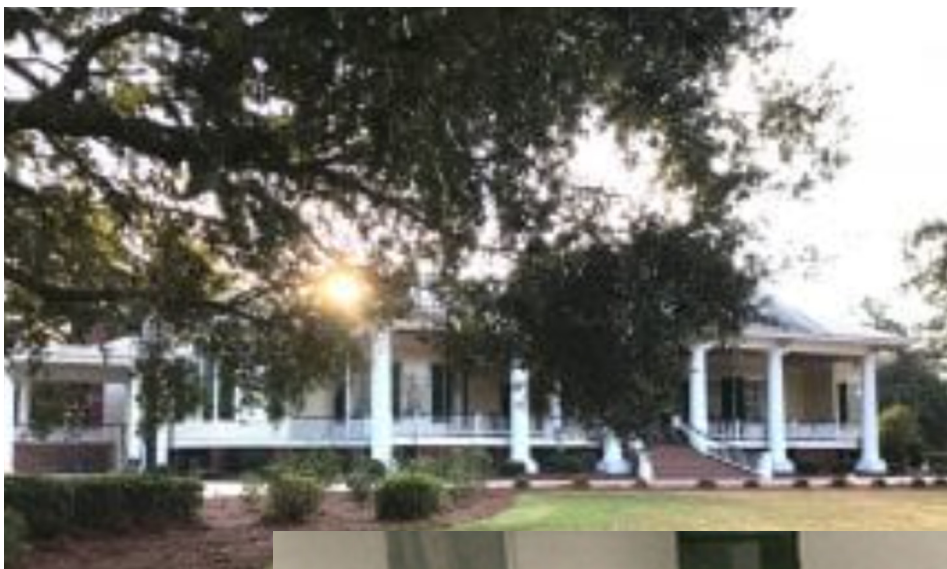
Participant Mtamanika Youngblood explained, “The idea behind New Communities was to take civil rights one step further into economic independence and economic rights, using agriculture as an economic base.”

In Southwest Georgia, Charles Sherrod had already become a legend as a SNCC field secretary. He saw that sharecroppers and tenant farmers were being systematically forced off their land when they attempted to register to vote. He concluded that collectively owned and farmed land would protect laborers from economic and political disenfranchisement. As he put it, “With land, a man holds in his hand the mechanism to control his destiny.”

Once incorporated, board members were selected to oversee daily operations. Slater King, a movement activist and real estate broker, was elected president. Fay Bennett became secretary, Leonard Smith was treasurer, and Father Albert J. McKnight, director of the Southern Cooperative Development Fund, was vice president. With King’s expertise, the group purchased 5,735 acres in Lee County, Georgia, with the help of a \$50,000 grant from the National Sharecroppers Fund. Despite the grant, they faced the enormous challenge of raising over \$1 million before their option expired. Their efforts were nearly derailed when King tragically died in a car accident, after which Charles Sherrod assumed the presidency.

African Americans. For 15 years they cultivated corn, peanuts, soybeans, watermelons, hay, and beef. Yet they faced constant barriers. Georgia's governor Lester Maddox blocked development funds, and the USDA discriminated against them in lending practices. A combination of drought, debt, and systemic racism forced them to sell off much of their land and ultimately lose the rest to foreclosure.

Even so, New Communities never dissolved. In 1999, Black farmers won a class action lawsuit against the USDA for racial bias, and New Communities was awarded \$12 million in 2009, the largest settlement in the case. In 2011, they purchased the 1,600 acre Cypress Pond Plantation near Albany, Georgia. Their story is one of resilience, vision, and the determination to build Black land ownership as a foundation for freedom.



🌀 If we secured land tomorrow, what protections and governance rules would we put in place on day one to prevent land loss over the long term?

Courtesy of the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\) Legacy Project](#)

417 Lafayette

NEW YORK CO-OP COLORS

In the aftermath of 9/11, the chefs, busboys, waitresses, and more that worked at the restaurant at the top of World Trade Center all found themselves displaced and out of work, and with an ownership that refused to support them through this hard and turbulent time.

Rather than simply giving up, the workers formed the Restaurant Opportunities Center, now the country's largest restaurant worker organization. Many had a vision to create a new restaurant that was representative of all those working in it, and which they could own and control with dignity.

It wasn't easy, though. According to the blog *American.Coop*: "Dramas include losing deposits to shady real estate deals, visiting Italian cooperatives to court investment, debating whether attendance at protests earned sweat equity, and fending off a dissident faction that picketed the new cooperative's fundraising dinners." Yet, they continued to struggle, and in 2006, the former WTC workers opened COLORS, which reflects "the culinary traditions of the 22 countries from which our proud worker-owners hailed."



How can worker cooperatives be used to rebuild in the face of tragedy and hardship, whether on the personal, local, or national level?

Courtesy of cultivate.coop



NEW ROOTS

COOPERATIVE FARM

Four Somali Bantu farmers came together in Lewiston, Maine to create a farm cooperative named “New Roots Cooperative Farm.” The organization’s aim is to build a business to make money, to give back to the community, and to support themselves. New Roots is like a new plant that is just getting settled in the ground. Like a new plant, New Roots needs time to further develop, along with support and help—hence the organization’s name. We can support New Roots by communicating demand and buying produce.

The four primary farmers of New Roots are linked by common origins and past experience, as they move forward with establishing their farm in Lewiston, Maine this year. They all share a background—they grew up farming in Somalia, albeit in different regions. At the same time, these farmers are united by mutual histories of leaving Somalia because of civil war, and of living for a couple of years in the refugee camps where they met. Yet the world of these farmers to forge their future in farming, together, on new soil, perhaps connects them most strongly. New Roots farmers have studied about farming and marketing, and have farmed collectively

since 2006; all are graduates of Cultivating Community’s New American Sustainable Agriculture Program (NASAP). Their project of establishing their own cooperative farm seems to stem from a process of learning together, also founded with a strong bond of friendship and community. A key part of what prepared them to start New Roots was learning about how the practice and trade of farming differs here compared to in Somalia.

The farmers’ focus on community—both among themselves and with other Maine folks—and their groundedness in history and culture of farming in Somalia serves as key sources of strength for their new farm. This strength is reflected in their name: New Roots. “New roots are like the roots of trees . . . this is our veins . . . if we have a strong connection, strong roots, then the tree will be healthy – the farm will have health.” The roots of the past, the bond among them, and the new connections they are making in community – all of this will help their “new roots” flourish as they launch their first planting season on Lewiston soil.

Courtesy of New Roots Cooperative Farm





OWÍNŽA QUILTERS COOPERATIVE

A new business is coming to life on the Pine Ridge reservation and it's springing—literally and figuratively—from the fabric of Lakota life and culture.

It's the Owinza Quilting Cooperative just outside Kyle and it's a beehive of activity.

"We have a really good crew here," said Business Manager Wantawa Red Bear.

The quilters are busy preparing star quilts for their grand opening next month.

"We have some really amazing quilters," said Red Bear. "Ones who are very seasoned and have been doing this for a long time. They put their heart and soul into it. Their energy, every day, goes right into their quilts."

The cooperative is entirely women and member owned.

"It's a bunch of uncis and in Lakota unci means grandma, and all these uncis come together and they're making star quilts," said Cora White Horse who sits on the Oglala Sioux Tribal Council. As a member of the council's Economic and Business Development Committee she has a special interest in the new venture.

"One of my personal goals is to ensure that there's more small businesses on the

reservation and when I read about the quilter cooperative I had to jump right on that and help them," she said.

With startup capital from the LIFT Economy and Thunder Valley Development Corp., the uncis are looking to build a business with deep roots in their Lakota culture that used to use buffalo hides to mark all manner of important moments.

"We no longer have access to the buffaloes," said Red Bear. "We replaced it with the star quilt. Now the star quilt holds significance with honorings and memorials and birthdays, celebrations all across the board. It is just a good gifting piece for Indigenous people."

The quilters aim to sell their quilts at their storefront outside Kyle and offer them online as well. They also aim to celebrate traditions.

"My children quilt. My grandchildren quilt, too," said quilting co-op member Loveletta Iron Horse. "I'm also a seamstress. I teach them other sewing skills so that way they can carry on our traditions because my grandma knew how to make quilts and so did my mom."



How have Lakota womxn incorporated tradition into their cooperative business?

Courtesy of KOTA TV



NORTHSIDE INVESTMENT COOPERATIVE ENTERPRISE RECLAIMING NORTH MINNEAPOLIS

The Northside Investment Cooperative Enterprise (NICE) was founded in 2011 in North Minneapolis, a neighborhood that has long faced disinvestment, predatory development, and systemic neglect. NICE emerged from a simple but transformative idea: what if residents themselves pooled resources to buy properties, keep them affordable, and direct development in a way that met community needs rather than outside speculation?

NICE is a community-owned investment cooperative, meaning that members—who are primarily North Minneapolis residents—collectively invest in properties and share decision-making power. This model directly challenges the traditional development system, where decisions are made by developers who often have little stake in the neighborhood beyond profit. Instead, NICE ensures that revitalization is guided by the values and priorities of those who live there.

Since its founding, NICE has acquired and

rehabilitated several properties, converting them into affordable housing and commercial spaces that support local entrepreneurs. These projects have not only stabilized the housing market but have also created opportunities for Black, Indigenous, and immigrant-owned businesses to thrive in spaces that might otherwise have been lost to gentrification.

The cooperative structure means that every investment is also a form of empowerment. Members gain ownership, equity, and collective control over their neighborhood's future. By choosing cooperative ownership, NICE has created a bulwark against displacement while building intergenerational wealth.

NICE also demonstrates how cooperative economics can be applied beyond farming or retail. By reclaiming urban space, it offers a model for how communities everywhere can use cooperation to counter speculative development, protect culture, and invest in their own futures.



What would it mean for more communities to adopt NICE's model of cooperative investment to reclaim and steward their neighborhoods?

Courtesy of [Land Bank Twin Cities](#)



ROOTSPRINGS: A SANCTUARY FOR HEALING AND COLLECTIVE CARE

Rootsprings is a Black and LGBTQ+ led cooperative retreat center in Annandale, Minnesota, on 36 acres of biodiverse farmland. Established in 2020, Rootsprings was envisioned as more than a retreat—it is a sanctuary designed to meet the urgent need for rest, healing, and cultural affirmation among BIPOC and queer communities.

The origins of Rootsprings lie in the recognition that BIPOC and LGBTQ+ people often face compounded barriers to well-being. Activists, artists, and healers are frequently on the frontlines of social change, but they are also vulnerable to burnout, stress, and trauma. Rootsprings emerged to provide intentional, culturally affirming spaces where those carrying the weight of systemic oppression could breathe, restore, and reconnect to the land.

Rootsprings operates as a hybrid cooperative and nonprofit, a model that allows it to combine democratic ownership with philanthropic support. Its mission is built on cooperative values—self-help, democracy, equity, solidarity, and transparency—applied to the urgent work of community care. The six founders, all Black and queer leaders deeply rooted in Minnesota’s

organizing and arts communities, purchased the land in 2021, taking it off the speculative market and placing it into collective BIPOC stewardship. The transition was itself an act of resistance against the cycles of dispossession that have long excluded marginalized people from land ownership.

Since opening, Rootsprings has hosted hundreds of nights of healing through its Solidarity Stay Program, which provides free or low-cost stays to those with financial barriers. The retreat offers hermitages, workshops, wellness programs, and gatherings centered around BIPOC and LGBTQ+ experiences. Rootsprings has become both a refuge and a hub—a place where art, healing, and activism intersect, and where community members can imagine and practice new ways of living together.

By investing in Rootsprings, its members and supporters are affirming a vision of collective care rooted in land. They are also asking a powerful question: what does it look like to reimagine wellness and belonging when those most often denied it are the ones designing the space?



How might a cooperative healing space like Rootsprings transform not just how we care for ourselves, but also how we care for one another and the land itself?

Courtesy of [The Fields at Rootsprings](#)



ST. PAUL COOPERATIVE CREDJAFAWN

The Credjafawn Social Club is one of the oldest Black social clubs still functioning in the Twin Cities Black community. It was formed one evening in 1928 by ten young adults who sensed the lack of social activities for persons in their age bracket. The name was devised from a letter out of each of the names of the ten charter members.

Although conceived as a social/recreational club, the Credjafawns initiated some outstanding projects of importance for the Black community. During the years of World War II, they began a cooperative food outlet. This store allowed their membership and the Black community to purchase foodstuffs at lower prices. Later this endeavor folded because of competition generated by the new concept of supermarkets. They also initiated the Credjafawn Credit Union. The credit union was established to provide low interest loans to club members, who, more oftentimes than not, were young with families. During times when white credit unions would refuse to grant loans to Black people, the Credjafawn Credit Union provided resources for home improvements

and college education. In addition, the club regularly provided scholarship money for the deserving and scholastically excellent students.

The Credjafawns were also responsible for integrating some of the hotels and other facilities, which refused to allow Black people the use of their accommodations for dances and other social gatherings. By sending members of the club who were light enough to pass for white to negotiate contracts, many facilities were thus integrated.

The Credjafawn Social Club Papers are important for two reasons. First, they are the only complete record of a social club in the Twin Cities for almost fifty years. Second, these papers demonstrate the inner workings of an organization dedicated to social betterment and upgrading of the Black community.

- What are the different community needs that Credjafawn was looking to meet?
- What role do celebration, culture and fun play in cooperative movements?

Historical data from David Taylor, Director, Black History Project (1974)

UJAMAA COOPERATIVE FARMING ALLIANCE



The Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance was founded in 2020, a moment when racial inequities in agriculture were starkly visible and food insecurity was worsening across the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic had revealed how fragile food systems were, especially for communities of color, and Black and Indigenous growers began asking what it would take to not just survive, but to build systems rooted in their own knowledge, traditions, and collective power. Out of these conversations, the Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance was born.

Ujamaa was created to fill a very specific gap: access to culturally meaningful seeds. Crops like okra, collard greens, sorghum, millet, and amaranth are not just foods, they are carriers of memory. They tell the story of African diasporic migration, Indigenous cultivation, resilience under slavery, and survival in the face of centuries of land theft and exclusion. Many of these seeds were saved by elders who carefully handed them down to younger generations. But with industrial farming taking over, younger people leaving rural areas, and cultural foodways devalued by mainstream agriculture, these seeds became harder to access. Communities risked losing vital pieces of heritage.

Ujamaa stepped into that moment with a cooperative structure that redistributed responsibility.

Instead of asking individual growers to save seeds in isolation, they created a network where farmers could collectively grow, preserve, and share them. This cooperative seed model built resilience in multiple ways: it lowered risk for growers, made seeds available to more people, and tied economic opportunity directly to cultural preservation.

The name “Ujamaa” comes from the Swahili word meaning “familyhood” or “cooperative economics,” one of the seven principles of Kwanzaa. It is a reminder that agriculture is not just about production and survival but also about kinship, care, and responsibility to future generations. In practice, the cooperative sells seeds, trains new growers, provides resources, and develops a seed economy that resists erasure. Every packet of seeds Ujamaa distributes is a vessel of history and a strategy for economic independence.

Today, Ujamaa connects growers across the country. It supports small farmers entering an agricultural system that has historically excluded them, and it expands opportunities for healing, cultural restoration, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Its work demonstrates that agriculture, when rooted in cooperation, can be a site of both cultural and economic liberation.



Which part of our cultural foodways is most at risk of disappearing, and how could a cooperative structure safeguard it while also creating income?

Courtesy of [Ujamaa Cooperative Farming Alliance](#)



WAGES NOW PROSPERA

“Women's Action to Gain Economic Security (WAGES) is dedicated to promoting the economic and social well being of low-income women through cooperative business ownership. The co-ops provide improved financial stability for low-wage workers and expand the economic and social empowerment of their families and communities throughout the greater Bay Area.”

Some Stories of PROSPERA's Success:

“Many business owners are constantly searching for ways to make more profits and that often means that the welfare of employees is shunted aside. But that can't happen at a cooperative, because the workers, managers, and shareholders are the same people. They don't need to make huge profits for owners or shareholders to stay in business, and there's no pressure to keep wages low...”

‘People can pool their skills and resources.’”

— Hillary Abell, WAGES

This “sharing of skills and resources allowed one of WAGES’ businesses to recently announce a year-end profit of more than \$90,000 last year. The worker-owners voted to take 70 percent of that amount in bonuses and put the rest into growing their business.”

“‘I’ve always looked for a workplace where one’s *ezfuerzos* [efforts] are recognized,’ said Luz, who was fired from her job after fighting for her rights as a worker... After being fired, Luz turned to WAGES. After finding work through WAGES, Luz now earns \$12.00 an hour plus profit-sharing, a far cry from the \$8.00 an hour she earned as a hotel worker under harsh working conditions. She is proud of her work, of the products she uses, and of her ability to help her youngest daughter through college.”



How do you think cooperatives impact their broader communities?



What kind of impact do you think joining a cooperative can have on an individual (psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, physically, etc.)?



How does the sharing of skills and resources help both individuals in a co-op, and the co-op as a whole?



YWBN COOPERATIVE BANK

NTHABELENG LIKOTSI

At the age of 33, Nthabeleng Likotsi is the executive chairperson of the Young Women in Business Network (YWBN), which she and nine other board members started in 2009. The company, managed by women from different professions and industries, is connected by one goal: to provide economic empowerment for all female professionals and entrepreneurs.

On the formation of YWBN, Likotsi said, "I asked myself what it meant to be a Black young woman in South Africa. And the truth of the matter was that not much is happening for Black women," she said.

She did research and found that stokvels (community-based informal saving groups) contributed billions to the economy yet had no way of harnessing this financial power. Likotsi saw that these groups could be elevated into the investment space, if they were given the opportunity and support, and so could become a much-needed resource for many households across the country.

This gives an insight into Likotsi's overarching goal: to create Black wealth. She realised that this could only be achieved through a bank that understood and was dedicated to a Black entrepreneurial clientele. This led to the formation of a YWBN cooperative financial institution, which currently has 420 shareholders from age 16 to 75 and has collectively generated R4,2 million in investment.

In the past year, and as the chairperson of the YWBN Co-operative Bank, Likotsi has furthered the cause by working to meet South African Reserve Bank requirements in order to propel YWBN from being a cooperative to a mutual bank. On Friday, 15 June 2018, she and veterans of the 1956 Women's March trooped from the Union Buildings to the South African Reserve Bank to submit their application.

On the march, Likotsi told Huffington Post that they were taking a public stance against the lack of access for Black women in the financial sector.

"There is a lot of preparation that goes into getting a license to run a mutual bank. The requirement is that you should have between R10 million to R15 million (R = rand), just for the application – excluding the capital expenditure and operational costs, among others," she said.

“Our theme is built around the women of 1956, who fought for political freedom. We can’t expect them to still fight for us. They are handing over the baton to us, the younger generation.”

She also stated that she is confident that the YWBN Mutual Bank will be fully operational in 2019. “There is no space for negativity. We will not fail.”

The economic might of stokvel saving groups

To understand why Likotsi sees potential where many others have not, it is important to understand the market she seeks to tap into and represent.

Stokvels are about “the power of a collective”. This collective comes together to pool money for a common aim, thus mobilising like-minded individuals towards achieving financial and social goals. Historically these short-term to medium-term goals included debt repayment (43%), emergency savings (44%), education (25%), groceries (31%), clothing (18%) and other (16%), according to the 2017 Old Mutual Savings and Investment Monitor.

However, stokvels have evolved: According to National Treasury Economist Olano Makhubela, 60% of stokvels are investment-driven, while 18% are investment clubs. Furthermore, stokvels are popular even with high income earners: 42% of households with incomes of R40 000 and above belong to one or more stokvels, according to the same Old Mutual survey.

With these investment groups going into areas such as property and equity, the financial sector cannot underestimate this growing informal sector but would have to find avenues to service it differently from traditional formal investments.

With these investment groups going into areas such as property and equity, the financial sector cannot underestimate this growing informal sector.

Who is Nthabeleng Likotsi?

Born in Botshabelo, Free State province into a family of businesspeople, Likotsi gained her leadership and community service capabilities from her parents and siblings. This spirit is what bolstered her as she shunned a career in accounting to venture into business and change the country’s economic outlook. She has a Master’s Degree in Entrepreneurship from Wits Business School, a post-graduate Certificate in Accounting from the University of Johannesburg, and a Certificate in Entrepreneurship from the Centre of Entrepreneurship at Wits Business School.

Likotsi is recognised in the international business community and she was awarded the 2013/2014 Women Leadership Award at the third Africa-India Partnership Summit in 2013. She is also an independent non-executive director of various companies, such as Apex Valves and Ubuntu Plastics, among others.



What informal cooperative and cultural method did Likotsi use as inspiration for the credit union?





YO MAMA'S HOUSE

COOPERATIVE IN DEVELOPMENT

YO MAMA'S HOUSE philosophy and practice is to empower mothers by disrupting the devaluation of women's invisible labor and increasing the recognition of the ART of Mothering that highlights the legacies of maternal wisdom and know-how that sustains healthy mothers, families and communities.

YO MAMA'S HOUSE is a demonstration project and model that many can learn from its MOTHER-CENTERED, social gospel and grassroots approach to empowering women as mothers to do their mothering work and creating pathways to wellness for those overburdened, under-resourced and sick and tired of being sick and tired. Healthy mothers raise healthy children, families and communities.

YO MAMA'S HOUSE is an art and healing space cooperative for mothers of all ages. We MOTHER, MENTOR and MAKE.

We MOTHER by sharing personal narratives and ancestral stories that hold our mothers' cultural wisdom, and by teaching each other traditional "woman's work" skills to younger mothers that move mamas from surviving to thriving and to sovereignty.

We MENTOR (and are mentored) by local artists who teach diverse artistic practices, non-traditional trade and business skills, and identify the resources needed for supporting emerging artistry and pathways to financial stability.

We MAKE art and create healing services that promote positive images and narratives about women as mothers and promote health and well-being. Healthy mothers raise healthy children, families and communities.

YO MAMA'S HOUSE is a shared (nonresidential) space for mothers who are working or aspiring artists, community activists/politicians or healers. These spaces include a full kitchen for women who need a commercial kitchen that support learning basic to culinary cooking skills, arts space for creating artwork from multiple genres, well-being space for relaxation and rejuvenation, an office/business hub, indoor and outdoor gardens, and spaces for hosting events by members.

Courtesy of [Amoké Kubat](#)