



Answering the Question: Where Do We Go From Here?

Posted by [Africatown](#) | 05 - Mar - 2021

With participants from around the world, the **8th Annual State of Africatown** brought powerful change-makers to the virtual stage to share their strategies, accomplishments, challenges and visions for a thriving Black Seattle.

It was a convention of Black brilliance, of proven-strategies and informed advice, of elders and youth, of community based organizers and elected officials, each speaker bringing their heartfelt and authentic contribution to a collective movement forward.

In the spirit of Sankofa, **Dr. Marcia Tate Arunga** opened the event with a libation in honor of the ancestors and in recognition of the indigenous community whose land held space for the gathering, noting that where the elders are present, we are assured that we are going in the right direction. And where the children are present, we know we have a future.

Honorable Dawn Mason, welcomed the Africatown community, giving the history of the convening and presented the Elder of Distinction Award to **Gus Newport**, former Mayor of Berkeley and former Director of Bostons Dudley Street Initiative the only community building project in the history of the United States to successfully use eminent domain to facilitate land acquisition.

As each speaker gave their reports to the community, they brought forth three prominent areas of focus:

-Access to Power

-Youth Outreach and Development

-Black Health and Healing

ACCESS TO POWER

As she opened the State of Africatown, **Honorable Dawn Mason**, current Board Member of **King County Equity Now** stated, power is the ability to define reality we must be self-determined. The **Honorable Charles Barron**, New York State Representative from East New York shared in Masons sentiments, emphasizing the importance of having a seat at the table to influence decision making at its root. Through Black radical leadership, not just Black faces in high places with no commitment to the community, Barron and his cohort have wielded collective power with seats on the city council, in district courts and on community boards and successfully prevented gentrification. They have been able to promote affordable and equitable development including construction of 12,000 units of housing affordable to neighborhoods median income of \$36,000, spent \$70 million on new parks, built three new elementary schools and completed a \$12 million youth

center.

Also on the east coast, **Majestic Lane**, Chief Equity Officer for the City of Pittsburgh echoed Barrons focus on developing strategic political power and encouraged the Africatown community to identify goals and find resources to make the systems conspire to help us. He placed particular emphasis on taking advantage of the new energy of the Biden Administration with its current focus on infrastructure development while encouraging big, bold initiatives and community collaboration over competition.

Local elected officials **Grimay Zalihay**, King County Councilmember from District 2 and **Kirsten Harris-Talley**, State Representative from District 37 made their reports addressing the needs of their overlapping constituencies. Both emphasized a commitment to being led by community and outlined current proposed legislation directed at policing oversight, ending incarceration of youth and creating policy pathways for maintaining and creating Black land equity for both families and the community at large.

Yordanos Teferi, the spearhead behind the East African Multicultural Community Center, outlined 10 years of organizing to create an economic opportunity and cultural innovation center within the Othello Square project on MLK. While major setbacks have occurred, specifically with broken promises and redirected funds by development partner, Homesite, she and her fellow organizers successfully prevented the demolition of the Hillman City DMV building, keeping eight East African businesses in their spaces and retaining equity for future community development.

As Chief of Staff at King County Equity Now, **Emijah Smith** described her working relationship with the East African community as part of a multifaceted advocacy plan for building Black equity solutions and investing in affordable housing. Smith announced the shift of KCEN into electoral politics as a 501c4 organization with 6 fulltime staff members and a Board of Directors with a focus on Black advocacy, Black amplification, Black research, anti-gentrification and Black land ownership.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Within the institution of the Seattle Public Schools, newly appointed Chief Academic Officer, **Dr. Keisha Scarlett**, announced a focus on bold initiatives to support Black academic excellence, starting with an emphasis on the success of Black boys. She noted that COVID-19 has presented challenges; however Black children were not thriving pre-COVID and some have even found relief from inhospitable school environments while homeschooling. In her position, she plans to bring a stronger focus on providing remote learning support to Black families, institute pro-Black and pro-indigenous anti-racism policy district-wide and to shift the current narrative of trauma focused outreach to Black student talent development.

Norfolk University student, former Africatown Youth Ambassador and King County Equity Now Community Organizer, **Cashayla Rogers**, represented Africatowns young leaders, describing her work over the summer of 2020 to amplify the demands of the Black community through outreach and events like Juneteenth, Fourth of YouLie and Umojafest.

Founder of Community Passageways, **Dominic Davis**, shared his successful

programs with a focus on diverting Seattle youth with high level felony convictions out of the juvenile justice system. With over 300 years of imprisonment diverted so far, his village mentality, also informs his latest program, Deep Dive, which took a list of 20 youth deemed by the Seattle Police Department as most likely to be victims of a shooting or to commit gun crimes and was able to help 16 of them find fulltime employment, 8 find their own apartments, 3 graduate from high school and another 3 take the SATs for their college entrance requirements.

As a representative of East African Community Services, **Simone Andu** also described the importance of providing culturally relevant services and resource access to address gun violence. Characterizing the youth as our most precious natural resource, he emphasized providing access to basic needs such as food and rental along with technology and mentorship.

BLACK HEALTH AND HEALING

With over 30 years of organizing to end gun violence in Queens, New York, **Erica Ford**, Founder of LifeCAMP advised Africatown to see gun violence as a disease and emphasized that healing is the number one priority. The epidemic must be interrupted with therapeutic services, mentorship, quality food, educational opportunities and employment resources. As a testimony to LifeCamps work, she reported that her neighborhood has gone four years without a single gun violence fatality.

own journey into developing the healing program the ZOLA Experience came, in part, out of engaging with families impacted by the trauma of gun violence a community in New Haven, Connecticut. Through her work developing tools for personal and community healing, she suggested that our concept of loss and trauma be expanded to consider the impact of many experiences common within the Black community from loss of secure housing and loss of access to healthy food to the loss of personal freedoms and opportunities for physical safety.

Garfield High School alum and Co-founder of GirlTrek, **Vanessa Smith Garrison**, also encouraged Africatown to add to its vision for healing stating that there can be no vision for Africatown, no vision for our liberation, no vision for our freedom that does not start with the healing of Black women. She described that Black women are dying at higher rates than any other group in the country, noting that most of the causes are preventable health issues that lie on the surface of deeper traumas. Through her programming of encouraging Black women and girls to prioritize their wellness for at least 30 minutes per day, she noted that the question of how are we pouring into ourselves should be part of every conversation from business development to community organizing.

THE STATE OF AFRICATOWN SEATTLE

Bringing together all of the themes of the gathering **K. Wyking Garrett**, President and CEO of Africatown Community Land Trust gave a report to the community in the spirit of **Sankofa**, looking back at the past year while preparing to move forward into the year ahead.

Africatown started 2020 with a focus on **Black health and wellness**, convening a group of practitioners from a wide spectrum of knowledge areas in the field to lay the ground work for a culturally responsive community health system all without

knowing that a **pandemic** was on the horizon that would dramatically and disproportionately impact the Black community.

Throughout the year the **Health and Wellness Group** continued to meet monthly while other initiatives were pursued in spite of the health crisis.

In April, Garrett penned an open letter calling for a **one billion dollar Anti-gentrification Community Development and Land Acquisition Fund** to be implemented by the City of Seattle as a first step in repairing the damages caused by federal, state and local policies directed at denying equity to Black Seattle.

At the end of May, Africatown along with the rest of the nation and the world watched in horror as the video of the murder of **George Floyd** was made public, and soon after mobilized on June 5th with a rally and teach-in on 23rd and Jackson. This set the stage for the unveiling of **King County Equity Now's** platform, demanding land, access to capital for development, and control over the resources that impact Black lives under the rallying cry **Pay The Fee, Free The Land, Equity Now!**

On June 7th, **Seattle Mayor, Jenny Durkin** responded with a proposal to invest \$100 million per year for ten years into the Black community to fund programs, rather than the land investment and access to capital called for by the community. In subsequent months, Mayor Durkin has altered her original proposal to call \$100 million for BIPOC programs leaving Black Seattle with questions as to how such generalized initiatives will address the specific history and systemic problems faced by the Black community, while also being wary of being pit in competition with other communities of color.

June 12th brought another announcement by the city (after convening a Black Lives meeting and neglecting to invite representatives from Africatown), in which Fire Station 6 on 23rd and Yesler was promised to be transferred to Africatown Community Land Trust. Advocating for ownership of this land since 2010, ACLT is in process of turning the former firehouse into the **William Grose Innovation Center**. The project has progressed with construction permits recently received, however the title and the deed to the land have still not been transferred to the community.

A few blocks west on 14th and Yesler, the community successfully mobilized to stop a predatory development project at the former site of the **Keiro Senior Center**, enforcing the city's equitable development agenda even when the city would not step up to do so. Africatown Community Land Trust is currently in contract negotiations to acquire the land and spearhead an unprecedented, cross-community affordable housing development that honors the legacy of Seattle's Black, Japanese and Pan-Asian and Indigenous communities.

First announced at the State of Africatown 2019, the opening of **Communion Restaurant and Bar** was an idea that became a reality, opening at the **Liberty Bank Building** in December of 2020.

The development of **Africatown Plaza**, just one block away, continues to move forward and is in the planning stages of providing opportunities for local, brilliant creatives to tell the story of Africatown through visual art in partnership with **Wa Na Wari**.

In 2020, Africatown Plaza was awarded \$640,000 from the **City of Seattle Equitable Development Initiative**, but the project is currently facing modern day **redlining** as the **Washington State Housing Finance Commission** has chosen to ignore equity agenda by announcing its decision not to fund development in the City of Seattle, where all of the states Black-led projects are located.

As ACLT continues to advocate for state funding of rental properties, it also seeks to restore the legacy of home ownership to the Central District, starting with the **Village Gardens Project** underway on Yakima street. In partnership with **Homestead Community Land Trust** and **Edge Developers**, 14 units of affordable townhomes will be constructed as an example of what can be scaled up in the future to make a larger impact. The cost of the homes will be around \$300,000 (instead of the \$700,000 and up cost of market rate townhomes) and will give priority to Black families who have been displaced from the neighborhood while allocating \$1 million for Black contractors to build the project.

In conclusion, Garrett reminded us that, in the wake of a presidential election and national legislature delivered by the power of Black women organizing the Black vote, Black people must ask, What are we owed in exchange?

In the meantime, it is important to move forward while being conscious of the examples and lessons from the past, including attempts to undermine the progress of the community through institutions led by those with the same complexion, but not the same connection or the same direction.

As Africatown moves into 2020, Garrett states that Seattle should **not just build back better, but build Black better**, emphasizing the need to disrupt the systemic **Jim Crow apartheid** faced by the Black community and replace it with a new normal rooted in equity.

What is the State of Africatown and Where Do We Go From Here? As Africatown continues to move forward in spite of setbacks and challenges, it is evident in this 8th annual convening that Black Seattle has the energy, initiatives and solutions needed to move forward in the right direction with and boldness and will continue to hold policy makers accountable to their commitment to supporting Africatowns trajectory forward.

Onward and upward.