

## **Youth Voice and Leadership in Mixed-Income Communities: Heritage Park and the Green Garden Bakery**

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*“Being with the Green Garden Bakery, it helped us have our voices heard. Also I know it helped influence some people in the community's voices to be heard as well. We as youth don't know everything, but at the same time the adults don't know everything, so it's like we can both share our own inputs about life and benefit each other. Having our own input on our community helps a lot.”<sup>1</sup>*

Research on youth development underscores the importance of reducing young people's risky behavior while also helping them develop the skills and competencies they need to succeed throughout their formative years and into adulthood.<sup>2</sup> Youth, particularly those in adolescence, have potential to be great connectors in their communities. Cultivating young people's leadership skills, showcasing their talents, and empowering them to contribute positively to their community also can shift community-wide perceptions about youth and promote a culture in which they are valued members of the community.

For those reasons, it is important to promote youth development in any community. In the neighborhood transformation context in particular, mixed-income redevelopment can be leveraged to enhance youth development. Ideally, as the community gains housing stability and quality, increased neighborhood safety, and improved neighborhood facilities—including schools and youth programs—young people will provide an important source of vision, voice, leadership, and inspiration.

Unfortunately, challenges within mixed-income communities often mean that young people are not included in redevelopment planning or implementation. Residents of mixed-

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<sup>1</sup> The quotes in this essay are from youth living in the Heritage Park mixed-income development in Minneapolis, MN, who are leaders with the Green Garden Bakery. We are grateful to the youth for taking time to share their perspectives. We thank Elana Dahlberg and Alecia Leonard of Urban Strategies, Inc. and Joni Hirsch of the National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities for conducting focus group conversations with the youth.

<sup>2</sup> Peter L. Benson, “Developmental assets: An overview of theory, research, and practice,” in *Approaches to Positive Youth Development*, eds. Rainer K. Silbereisen and Richer M. Lerner (London: Sage), 35-58; Peter L. Benson et al., “Positive youth development: Theory, research, and applications,” in *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development*, eds. Richard M. Lerner and William Damon (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.), 894.

income communities can be diverse in income, race, ethnicity, culture, and language, and often experience unequal access to opportunities and resources, as well as different expectations around norms. Across these differences, community members hold varying perceptions about young people and their role in the community. Due to factors such as individual bias, targeted policing, and unequal access to supports and resources, low-income youth, particularly youth of color, may feel stigmatized and become targets of surveillance and exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Programs for youth may be overshadowed by a focus on supports for adults and young children. Adolescents also are frequently the focal point of conflicts involving behavior and delinquency,<sup>4</sup> so programs that do focus on them may emerge as a reaction to these problems rather than from a desire to build on youth as a community asset.

Nonetheless, a recent scan of the field found some exemplary efforts to promote positive youth development in mixed-income communities.<sup>5</sup> One is the [Green Garden Bakery](#) (GGB) in Heritage Park, Minneapolis, an innovative model of social entrepreneurship within a mixed-income community that invests in youth leadership, and one that has produced positive outcomes for participating youth and for the broader community. Green Garden Bakery's story illustrates how helping to create and support youth development opportunities can promote personal development and agency; build social skills and connections across race, class, and age groups; shift negative perceptions about youth; minimize the challenges that unengaged youth can present for the community; and minimize stressors youth may face in a mixed-income setting. This essay was written in partnership with D'Loveantae Allen, Ephraim Adams, and Mohamed Mohamed, three of the young community members who help to advance the work of the Green Garden Bakery today.

*“For me living in a mixed income community....Everyone should know everyone else’s perspectives. Some people are lower class and some people are higher class. I don’t want to go around . . .having to see people of higher class, like homeowners, judge people from the lower class because that will make the lower class feel, like, really bad. And some people might need more help than others and if you don’t need help why don’t you go out of your way to help somebody else?”*

### **The Heritage Park Community**

Heritage Park Apartments in Minneapolis, MN is a mixed-income housing development constructed as a part of a master plan for the transformation of a former public housing site. The

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Clampet-Lundquist et al., “Moving teenagers out of high-risk neighborhoods: How girls fare better than boys”. *American Journal of Sociology* 116 no. 4, (2011): 1154-1189.

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. Chaskin, Florian Sichling, and Mark L. Joseph, “Youth in mixed-income communities replacing public housing complexes: Context, dynamics and response”. *Cities* 35 (December 2013): 423-431.

<sup>5</sup> Emily Miller, Taryn Gress, and Alex Curley, *Promoting Positive Youth Outcomes in Mixed-Income Developments: Scan of the Field #3*. (Cleveland, OH: National Initiative on Mixed-Income Communities, 2020).

redevelopment was led by McCormack Baron Salazar, and support for human capital development and community programs has been provided by Urban Strategies, Inc. The development now includes for-sale homes, senior housing, high-end condominiums, and affordable homeownership opportunities. The neighborhood offers bicycle and walking trails, a public library, 24 acres of park land, some retail and commercial businesses, and a neighborhood school. However, food access is a common concern for residents, with limited options for obtaining fresh food in close proximity to the neighborhood.

Heritage Park is home to over 3,000 residents, 45 percent of which are children and youth under the age of 18. Most homeowners in Heritage Park are white, while most renters in Heritage Park are African American<sup>6</sup> or black, including East African, Somali, and Oromo residents. The ethnic diversity in this community presents challenges around cultural understanding and inclusivity, especially among adults.

Economic differences among the neighborhood's residents fall along racial lines: While the median income for white households is around \$78,750, the median income for black households is \$19,676. The economic differences are reflected in the observation of one GGB participant, who said: "In our community we have...a higher-middle-class area on one side, then like a lower-class [area]. I'd say I'm from like from the lower-class area. I wish that people would know what it's like and how it feels..... I wish people knew all different sides of us, all the perspectives."

### ***The Green Garden Bakery***

*"As a teen growing up in North Minneapolis there's a lot of trouble I could have gotten into. Thank God for Green Garden Bakery. It gave me something to do other than just being outside all day. I wanted to make my own money and help other people. I think I have learned more here than I learned at school."*

The Green Garden Bakery was founded in 2014 by youth in Heritage Park who recognized they had acquired new skills after participating in years of cooking and gardening education offered by Urban Strategies, Inc., along with other community partners. Several youth developed a healthy vegetable-based dessert cake recipe during cooking classes, using excess green tomatoes from a Heritage Park garden, and set a goal of making \$500 for a friend who had recently suffered a terrible incident and been paralyzed. They sold the green tomato cake at a local festival and ending up raising over \$1,500. The youth decided to donate one third of their profits to their friend, reinvest one third into the supplies needed to do more sales, and use the

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<sup>6</sup> Editors' Note: We have recommended that essay authors use the term "African American" when referring specifically to descendants of enslaved people in the United States and the more inclusive term "black" when referring broadly to members of the African diaspora, including African Americans, Caribbean Americans, and Africans. In this way, we seek to acknowledge the unique history and experience of descendants of enslaved people in the United States and also the diversity of backgrounds within the larger black community.

last third to compensate themselves for their hard work. The program still uses this financial model today, donating a third of their profits, allocating a third to supplies, and using the remaining third to compensate youth.

Since 2014, with continued support from Urban Strategies, the youth have developed a business model, expanded their business, and capitalized on their skills to generate more teen employment in the neighborhood. Today, more than 150 youth are involved in the bakery at some level, as sales and marketing leads, entrepreneurs, and graphic design apprentices among others, and many more are interested in joining. The young employees still bake green tomato cakes, along with additional baked goods that meet a variety of health and dietary restrictions and preferences, using vegetables they grow in their garden. The youth sell their baked goods to customers around the community at farmer's markets, local co-ops, and small businesses; customers can also place online orders.<sup>7</sup>

The program has expanded to include a curriculum for younger children, so they can start building business and leadership skills from a younger age. This approach makes it possible for siblings from age 5 to 19 to work together for several years in the program, while also preparing the older youth to transition into adult leadership roles. The next step for GGB is to create a neighborhood-based retail bakery and commercial kitchen space to serve the Heritage Park community and beyond.

### **Impact**

Participating in Green Garden Bakery gives young people in Heritage Park an important anchor in their community, as this reflection by a co-founder attests:

*Looking back, the most impactful moment of my future was in third grade when I walked past a healthy cooking class for kids in my community. I was hooked. Even after losing my housing in the community and moving around all over the city, I would find my way back to that cooking class every day after school. Soon after, I was introduced to gardening. At first I hated getting my shoes dirty, but I remember the first day I liked the garden. It was when one of the master gardeners taught me about Japanese beetles and how to catch them in a bucket so they didn't eat our corn. For some reason I was totally fascinated.*

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<sup>7</sup> For more information about Heritage Park, The Green Garden Bakery and other positive youth development strategies implemented there, see Miller, Gress, and Curley, *Promoting Positive Youth Outcomes in Mixed-Income Developments*.

*In a couple of years, my friends and I started Green Garden Bakery, but things didn't get much easier in my life as the years went on. I was hit by a car while crossing the street and had to be resuscitated outside of our community space. I received a traumatic brain injury and was out of school for a few months. The first and last people to visit me at the hospital were my Green Garden Bakery teammates. Not long after that I lost one of my best friends and my father was murdered outside my house. I still showed up to Green Garden Bakery that same day.*

Other benefits described by youth include feeling like a valued, contributing member of the community, which leads to a sense of empowerment, pride, and affirmation; feeling better connected to, understood, and appreciated by adults (especially for youth who have felt stigmatized on the basis of race, income, and age); and feeling that they now have a voice in their community. For example:

**Better Communication Skills.** “I was one of those people who loved to talk but at the same time was shy, so unless you approached me I would not say a word to anybody. I would never approach anyone. So being involved in GGB helped me get out of my comfort zone, it's helped me with my communication skills. I'm able to approach people easier. There are times when I still have trouble, and I'm still getting used to that, but it's more comfortable now. So it's easier for me to communicate with people and my teammates.”

**Connectedness.** “Green Garden Bakery has helped me make relationships with a lot of people, kids and adults. So from the kid aspect of it, we kind of work in the engagement office, and there's a back door, so a kid will come up and knock on the back door to get a snack and we'll get him a snack...And for adults, I mean, when I'm at a sale I get to meet new people and hand out business cards.”

**Feeling Supported.** “Green Garden Bakery has been a support system and another family while mine was grieving. It turned out that my coping mechanism was the garden—gardening was my happiness, life, renewal and hope. I will graduate high school this year, just received a Beat the Odds Scholarship through the Children's Defense Fund, and plan to go to college to study urban agriculture and food law.”

**Feeling Known.** “We've been able to be more in touch with the adults, we've been able to go out into the community, but we're based at Heritage Park, so even the people at the leasing office if I walked by they would say ‘Hello Ahmad,<sup>8</sup> how is your day’ and they would know me, and it would be good to know them back. And then also some of the times we're doing back-to-school events, some of the adults that would live in the neighborhood would, know who I am. If they saw me in a random area, they would be, like, okay if I need help I'm going to go to this guy. And it just feels good.”

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<sup>8</sup> Names in the quotes and resident descriptions have been changed for privacy.

**Feeling Valued.** “Once I joined Green Garden Bakery I got more involved with it, like the neighborhood clean-up and stuff like that, cleaning up the environment for Earth Day, community drives where we’d give gift bags to the kids. And the kids knew I was involved in GGB so they’d come up to me and ask, ‘Could you go grab me a snack,’ because we’d give out snacks to the kids. And it kind of just felt good hearing stuff like that from them.”

**Self-Affirmation.** “On October 30th we were picking up leaves from people’s front curb...to help out our garden. Someone drove past us while we were picking them up and she wanted to participate as well, so she said she would leave some bags out in front of her curb in a little bit and we could come and pick them up. And she told us as we were doing it she was proud. And I don’t know about anyone else but that made me feel empowered, like I’m doing something.”

**Engagement.** “I’ve lived in Heritage Park basically my whole life, so I already knew basically everyone, a lot of the kids. [But] for me, I think Green Garden Bakery made me more involved in the community.”

**Awareness of Community Strengths.** “Being a part of Green Garden Bakery, it brought me out of my comfort zone and I realized there are so many cool people around the community, like I should’ve known them back then, and it’s like what have I been doing this whole time?”

Some of the impacts have extended to participants’ families. As one participant explained, the “passion for success” that Green Garden Bakery inspires is spreading: “My younger brother is spending nine months in a juvenile detention center. He was really struggling after losing his father and calls me every week. He always asks about Green Garden Bakery and tells me how he tells the other boys about how his sister runs a business and was on TV once. He gets out in a few months and he wants to help in the garden this summer to stay out of trouble.”

The bakery’s effect on the larger community has been equally powerful. GGB has created opportunities for adults and youth to connect and engage across lines of difference, which has changed how some adults view young people, especially youth of color. For example, “Bill,” a homeowner who lives in a single-family home on the western boundary of the neighborhood, had always liked the neighborhood’s appearance, diversity, and close proximity to downtown, but he didn’t like the frequent incidents of vandalism, property crime, and teens and young adults fighting in the neighborhood park. Bill initially believed these problems were tied to youth and low-income renters living at Heritage Park Apartments, but his interactions with neighborhood youth through the Green Garden Bakery debunked those assumptions. Reflecting now on GGB and how he feels about the neighborhood after living there for seven years, Bill said: “[GGB] is a great program. I’ve purchased desserts from them and they are phenomenal. I often drive down Van White [Memorial Blvd.] and see [young people] out in the garden. Now I’m proud and upbeat.”

## ***Implications***

There are numerous implications for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, evaluators, and funders when it comes to supporting youth development opportunities in mixed-income communities. The main one we want to highlight in this essay, however, is the importance of lifting up the voices of youth when considering how to empower and support them. In that vein, youth who live in Heritage Park offered the following guidance to their peers:

- **Get Involved.** “Your voice isn’t going to be heard unless you’re doing something. So any community givebacks or picking up weeds or something, help and share your opinion,” one GGB participant says. Adds another, “Just do something out of the ordinary that you know you wouldn’t do to get out of your comfort zone, because...getting to know and do different things is really fun actually.”

The youth also offer this advice to adults:

- **Talk to kids and teens, and let them know they are being heard.** It’s especially important to ask whether youth need help. Even if they say no, if it looks like they’re struggling then help them anyway. Be persistent.
- **Give encouragement.** As children become adolescents they tend to receive less encouragement, even while they are trying to act more mature. “That little push of encouragement actually goes a long way—even if we don’t express it—and makes us want to do better.”
- **Help youth learn from their mistakes.** Tell them when they’re in the wrong as well as when they’re doing things right: “It’ll make them feel like they did a really good thing and they’ll empower themselves after that.”
- **Lift up the fact that youth contribute positively to community.** “For youth to feel empowered, they have to actually feel like they’re actually doing something,” one participant said. Another added, “They could do other stuff...even little stuff like being a translator for older people can make them feel like they’re doing stuff for the community.”
- **Hold community events to reinforce a sense of belonging.** “In Heritage Park we have National Night Out, that’s a really big event. The whole neighborhood comes together in this big field—preschoolers all the way to elders—and then we just all have a good time, talk to each other.”

A participant in the Green Garden Bakery sums up this advice with one clear and compelling observation: “Continue to encourage us and uplift us, because our voices cannot be heard if we’re silent. And if we don’t have no type of motivation from not even our own parents or any other adult or guardian, what’s the point?”

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