

A Celebration of Life as Resistance to Environmental Racism: Roots Community Festival
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Summary

The Roots Collective summer programs occurred between July 28 - 30 and consisted of the Explore Your Roots: Environmental Justice Workshop (1), Greener Things Urban Agricultural Tour (2), and Roots Community Festival (3). Each program had a unique main focus: (1) to introduce youth to environmental justice, (2) to highlight the work of local BIPOC-owned farms that mitigate food insecurity in Fort Worth, Texas, and (3) to provide a platform for organizers to network and residents to connect with local organizations that promote the well-being of people of color and the working class of Fort Worth.

Project Description

With the present environmental crisis, it is imperative that everyone, particularly young people, feel informed and empowered enough to change the trajectory of our world. The workshop was the primary conduit for educating rising high schoolers about environmental justice, introducing them to advocates in the environmental justice movement, and encouraging them to imagine their ideal futures. We watched short films, engaged in discussion, and met individuals who professionally pursue justice from varying fields such as politics, research, arts, and grassroots advocacy. I structured the workshop to include not solely classroom instruction but also an electric bike scavenger hunt through the neighborhood, a field trip to a local farm, a speaker panel, and hands-on activities, such as a terrarium building party. I wanted to implicitly show students that there is more than one way to learn and that they too can use different mediums—workshops, journaling, photography—to incite change.

Recruiting students to participate in the workshop proved to be a challenge since many high school aged kids had a job or were otherwise unfamiliar and uninterested in the topic of environmental justice. Although I anticipated inviting twelve students to participate in the workshop, five youth and a few local community members ultimately attended. The smaller group created an intimate setting for questions, dialogue, and detailed demonstrations of topics such as soil contamination and plastic pollution. Moreover, a fluid exchange of ideas emerged as attendees shared their experiences with mixed residential-industrial zoning, brownfields, and gentrification, to name a few. We created a space where everyone was both a teacher and pupil.

The Roots Collective programs truly embraced collaboration. This year, I recruited my two advisers from a previous project and together we formed a spearheading committee of experienced activists, educators, and residents from different neighborhoods across Fort Worth. These individuals, who represented a range of generations, contributed diverse perspectives to the planning process from advertising strategies to the workshop lesson plan. Although not originally part of my proposal, the idea for an urban agricultural tour arose from one of my committee members and his partner, both of whom are local artists. Greener Things was an augmented reality (AR) bus tour of community farms in Fort Worth's predominately-BIPOC Eastside and Southside neighborhoods. Participants began the tour with their choice of beverage from a local Black-owned coffee shop, then met growers and explored Black Wall Street Farm, Tabor Farms, and Opal's Farm. At each farm, tourists located various QR placards that, once scanned, directed them to an animated information card about a native medicinal plant or invasive species. Even with this change in plans, I found that the budget was sufficient, thus I did not have to seek additional fundraising.

Roots Community Festival, the culminating event, was an extension of a mutual aid cookout I organized last summer, at the same site, with a similar aim to connect people with local resources. It was through this event where I worked closely with my two previously mentioned advisers and met other

community leaders who became collaborators with Roots Collective. I learned tremendously from my experiences last year— namely to delegate better, market the event by directly speaking to residents, and in so doing, to provide substantial resources to further the goals of my community partners. That said, I wanted to bring the same heart, but with a fresh perspective back to the community.

The festival provided an opportunity for locals to demonstrate their skills through photography, videography, painting, and writing in English and Spanish. Furthermore, guests had access to free environmental justice books, a nature empowerment-themed painting session, community vision board, bounce house, food trucks, and local resources— spanning from low-cost transportation to parenting counseling. Nearly all of our 24 vendors and centers represented were owned by BIPOC or otherwise had women leadership. Such intersectional organizations attracted over 215 people to the festival.

I grounded my approach to this project in faith and humility. I trusted in my collaborators and relied on their wisdom to create programming attuned to the needs of the neighborhoods in south Fort Worth. As an outsider to the community, I knew I could contribute some academic knowledge and planning skills, but I had much to learn. Biweekly spearheading committee meetings provided opportunities for strategizing and camaraderie that helped me grow as a compassionate leader. Besides my committee meetings, I made an effort to attend locally organized events such as Juneteenth celebrations, a community gardening day, home garden builds, a people's assembly, and activist gatherings. My passions for food sovereignty and local empowerment also inspired me to volunteer at a community farm on Fridays and offer informal grant consulting for a couple of Black women business owners. These visits enabled me to develop productive relationships with people across Fort Worth who work diligently to protect the well-being of the most vulnerable. I strived to meet my community members where they were, understand their struggles, and celebrate their successes, so that I could help realize their dreams for a more peaceful future.

As I prepare to apply for medical school in the coming years, I will not be able to spearhead a project with as much breadth as this summer's Roots programs. However, I will gladly advise those who want to organize a similar project and support community efforts for a healthy, equitable Fort Worth.

Reflection

Peace is presence in a healthy ecosystem, physical stability, spiritual connection, intellectual fulfillment, and social belonging to the extent necessary for personal contentment. Societal peace necessitates relationships between humans and our global ecosystem founded on respect, empathy and courage. I put respect at the forefront of my organizing by listening to community members' life experiences and observing what they are doing in Fort Worth to challenge social injustice— whether that be speaking up at a school board meeting or feeding one's family through their backyard garden. From these interactions, I realized that there are numerous dimensions to service and peace-building with which anyone can get involved. I met several groups and individuals who apply their gifts, from public speaking to engineering, to inspire peace and joy in the lives of others.

Respect intertwined with empathy creates a possibility for peace. During the workshop, I emphasized different perspectives of the environmental crisis by asking students where they think our waste goes and showing its actual destinations primarily to landfills, incinerators, streets, and waterways in low-income areas around the globe, for example. I aimed to help workshop attendees integrate the experience of living with the consequences of direct pollution into their own lives, especially since pollution eventually harms us all. Another point of dialogue was the Growing Seeds Panel where two city employees and two grassroots organizers shared their approaches to promoting the well-being of Fort Worth residents. Additionally, I put several program directors in communication with each other where they have drafted contracts or voiced plans to collaborate on future programming.

Courage to act in spite of discomfort or hardship fortifies respect and empathy into a foundation for peace. It is having the courage to be steadfast in one's values, advocate for the oppressed, and pursue dreams of a just world that is indispensable for promoting peace. Through each Roots program, I

welcomed people to imagine a Fort Worth where everyone has equitable access to fresh air, potable water, clean soil, nutritious food, affordable housing, dignified education, cultural affirmation, and comprehensive healthcare along with the strategies to realize it. I challenged high schoolers, small business owners, and other organizers to recognize their own potential. A result of this encouragement was enthusiastic support for another environmental justice workshop in succeeding years as well as the expressed interest of a few vendors and guests to host another wellness festival. More concretely, one of the community organizations will do a project in the fall that will embrace similar objectives and draw upon the connections they made at Roots Community Festival. It takes courage to walk three miles from a shelter in the heat or to rise from bed on your only day off work to learn about people and spaces that might help you. After years of disappointment and trauma, one's own will can become the greatest obstacle to positive change. However, that is when our neighbors have the courage to mobilize, fill in our weak spots, and support us— as we support them when they are weak. When we each commit to practicing respect, empathy, and courage, we have the potential to change our communities for the better.

Personal Statement

Roots Collective joins an intergenerational network of changemakers in Fort Worth, Texas who recognize the inherent value of each individual and strive to bring peace to our world through the pursuit of justice. I am blessed to have engaged with compassionate community members of varied ethnicities, genders, sexualities, socioeconomic backgrounds, immigration statuses, faiths, abilities, ages, body sizes, and occupations who have illustrated the challenges and rewards of us all working together.

- Chioma Ugwonali