**Project Title:** Storytelling For Energy Equity (formerly Reducing Energy Burdens: Tackling Energy Inequity in Dekalb County)

**Country of project implementation:** United States

**Sponsoring college:** Agnes Scott College

**Project leader:** Gwyn Rush (U.S., graduate of Agnes Scott College)

**Team member:** Brittany Judson (U.S., graduate of Agnes Scott College)

**Project website:** [https://mayecorps.weebly.com/read-home.html](https://mayecorps.weebly.com/read-home.html)

An energy burden is defined as the amount of income a household spends on energy. Atlanta ranks third in the country for cities with unaffordable energy burdens for low income households and Georgia has some of the highest energy bills in the country. Energy inequity, which describes the unfair distribution of energy consumption and production, disproportionately impacts low-income communities and communities of color, particularly Black and Latino communities in Metro Atlanta. The causes of this include poor housing infrastructure, utility company decisions to raise bills, and lack of investment in programs to alleviate high energy burdens long term. These causes, and others, all stem from a white supremacist system of oppression that has systematically blocked, disinvested from, and committed violence against communities of color. At MAYE Corps, we believe that storytelling is a powerful tool for change. That is why we created an engaging publication that incorporates community member perspectives alongside empirical data to share with decision makers on why retrofitting projects should be funded and have a racial justice lens. Through this project, we shed light on the importance and intersectionality of energy burdens and developed youth energy equity champions to carry on energy equity work in the future.

Our final product is a visually engaging publication by MAYE Corps called HOME: Stories and studies on why we need equity-centered energy efficiency. We combined quotes from community member interviews and research from many of the other organizations doing energy equity work across the country to highlight four major benefits of retrofitting with a racial justice focus: economic agency, health, stopping gentrification, and mitigating the climate crisis. We define peace as having the freedom and safety to make your own choices. That is why we believe so deeply in the power of retrofitting to provide these benefits in one’s home. In the short term, this project helped us build connections in Metro Atlanta to continue our energy equity work, taught us valuable community engagement skills, and helped our organization hone and communicate our values. MAYE Corps is dedicated to bringing peace through healthy and financially stable homes and this project was an important step in sustaining and growing our organization to continue this work in the future. In the long term, this publication will serve as an important tool for advocating for more public and private funding for the solution we know works: racial justice-based retrofitting programs that bring peace to residents and communities through the four benefits outlined in the publication. All of the community members we worked with and most of our project team and staff were based in Metro Atlanta because these voices matter most in talking about Metro Atlanta issues.

At MAYE Corps, we know there is a lack of investment in retrofitting programs for low income households. In fact, that is why we created our organization in the first place. We originally applied in the 2019-2020 cycle of Projects for Peace and proposed spending the grant funds to complete 1-2 major home retrofits in our community. The project title was Reducing Energy Burdens: Tackling Energy Inequity in Dekalb County. We proposed this project because retrofitting has a direct, tangible impact on people’s lives by making their homes healthier and more affordable to live in. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, it quickly became clear that working with people in their homes was a major health concern. When we were afforded the opportunity to resubmit a project proposal funded exclusively by Projects for Peace with similar goals for energy equity, we decided to use these funds to build community connections and create a tool that can be used to support our organization and advocate for more funding for retrofitting in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed other challenges to our project besides changing our proposal idea. When we originally proposed our project in late 2019/early 2020, our Projects for Peace team at MAYE Corps was very different. Between our initial proposal and completing the project, everyone on our
original project team graduated and some had to transition out of the project team because of jobs and other responsibilities. We also had to bring new people onto the team who were not involved in the original project proposal. On top of this, we had to complete our project completely remotely and never met in person as a project team. These transitions between project teams and remote format unfortunately led to pushing our project timeline back and caused some gaps in communication with our primary community partner. By mid-summer, our primary community partner notified us that they could no longer work on the revised timeline and we had to find a new way of connecting with interviewees. We quickly pivoted and utilized the network that MAYE Corps as a whole and individual project team members had cultivated over the last few years of our environmental justice work and were able to find new interviewees. Not being able to meet physically with our network, community partners, interviewees, and team members made this process much more challenging but thanks to Zoom, emails, and phone calls, we were still able to connect. One piece of advice we would give to future Projects for Peace is to cultivate relationships with your network and community safely in person as much as possible and make your timeline as gracious and forgiving as possible. While working remotely posed challenges for community partner relationships, it did allow us to dedicate more money to compensate people for their time and we could include people in our project team who would not have been able to participate in person because of geographic location or transportation barriers. Another challenge we faced was having to rethink our final publication. Our 2021 Projects for Peace proposal included a photo essay but due to health concerns and our moving timeline, we were unable to capture enough photos for this format. We quickly transitioned and chose to create a publication inspired by zines that would still be visually engaging and creative without needing a lot of photos taken by project team members.

The Projects for Peace grant helped MAYE Corps think more intentionally about our community partner connections and practices. It also helped us hone our values and create a final publication that can communicate those values to future funders, potential team members, and community partners. Our organization is stronger and more sustainable having gone through this process and better equipped to tackle energy inequity in our Metro Atlanta community. We cannot wait to share HOME with the world and build a more equitable future where young people, especially young women and people of color, can feel confident and assured in leading the way. We would like to thank our project staff as well, including Amirah Kahera for her amazing project management services and Autumn Lafferty and Madeleine Tulk for their commitment to connecting with and interviewing the community members highlighted in our publication.

Personal Statements:

Gwyn Rush: Above all else, I am grateful for the trust and support that Projects for Peace and Agnes Scott College, our sponsoring college, provided to our organization with this project. As a youth-led organization, there is ultimately nothing better that can be done to support us now and in the future than trust us with the financial resources we need to carry out our mission and goals.

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