

**BLACK
FUTURE
CO-OP
FUND**



MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY:

**Five years of love in the real world
with the Black Future Co-op Fund**

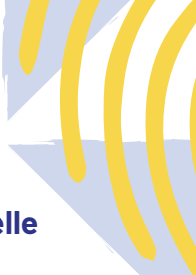




Philanthropy believes it is part of the solution. And sometimes it is. However, we believe that the philanthropic sector requires a radical re-imagining...We believe that the wealth currently concentrated and privately held in the hands of increasingly few...is truthfully the world's shared, collective endowment..."¹

-Alnoor Ladha and Lynn Murphy





In June 2020, four Black women set out to do something that had never been sustainably done in Washington state. The four of us — Andrea Caupain Sanderson, Angela Jones, Michelle Merriweather, and T’wina Nobles — launched the Black Future Co-op Fund, a cooperative philanthropy rooted in the beauty, soulfulness, and strength of Blackness. We envisioned the Fund as a way to ignite Black generational wealth, health, and well-being across our state while shifting the philanthropic paradigm. Five years later, we reflect on the journey from that initial vision to where we are today.

BLACK GENEROSITY, BLACK PHILANTHROPY

Justice and the need for change have long been discussed in philanthropic circles. In 2020, spurred on by the urgency of the moment, our group of four had to take action. We couldn’t wait for a perfect path. We needed to summon our courage, risk failure, and try something new. But even as we set our sights on launching the first enduring Black philanthropic organization of its kind in Washington, we knew that we already carried a legacy of immense generosity passed down from our ancestors.

The history of Black giving overflows with profound kindness and responsiveness that stretches the bounds of what’s possible, time after time, to help our people. Yet Black ways of generosity and loving care often go unappreciated by a Eurocentric framework that dismisses them as “informal” or views them as less worthy of acclaim than white philanthropic largesse. Author Tyrone Freeman notes that Black philanthropy “goes back to traditions of giving, caring, and sharing that actually were a part of West African cultures before colonialism.”² In his book *Madam C. J. Walker’s Gospel of Giving: Black Women’s Philanthropy during Jim Crow*, he reflects: “This idea that generosity and compassion traversed the Atlantic along with other forms of African cultural genius within black bodies via the slave trade is astounding in light of the conditions under which the enslaved suffered.”³

The germ of our idea for the Fund was to embody, to the best of our abilities, this deep spirit of Black generosity. We didn’t aim to be Black women doing Eurocentric philanthropy. We wanted to approach the work differently. We wanted to do it Blackly. Valaida Fullwood, who celebrates African American philanthropists in her book *Giving Back*, writes, “I long to see a radical shift in philanthropy that will come to characterize the 21st century. That is, a reclaiming of the root meaning of philanthropy: love of what it means to be human.”⁴ For us, this would look like philanthropy with a passion for removing obstacles rather than a penchant for bestowing gifts wrapped in burdensome requirements.

Viewing a wide range of Black women’s giving as philanthropy, Tyrone Freeman writes that this expanded perspective “gives voice to the heart of generosity at the core of black women’s embodied actions, commitments and identities.”³ And that was our aspiration here: to give voice to our hearts.

INJUSTICE AND THE NEED FOR REPAIR

While there are caring and dedicated people in philanthropy, the system as a whole is badly out of balance. A Bridgespan/Echoing Green research report describes how “racial inequity is built into philanthropic norms,”⁵ and according to a 2024 data summary from Candid/ABFE, “Majority Black-led nonprofits receive 300% less revenue than their white-led counterparts.”⁶ The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy reports that, in 2022, funding for Black communities totaled only 1.3% of overall philanthropic giving.⁷

Philanthropic redlining has made it common for those with the most cultural competence in serving their communities to receive the least funding. Compounding this inequity in distribution, vast wealth intended for the public good is sequestered in the accounts of foundations and donor-advised funds. *The True Cost of Billionaire Philanthropy*, a 2023 Institute for Policy Studies report, notes that “funds can potentially sit for decades without flowing to charities.”⁸ That hoarded wealth grows larger every year, while Black people go on paying the price.

The four of us set out to be medicine for a sick system, out of deep care for our communities and our future descendants. Building on our decades of leadership, we sought to show how philanthropy can stand up for justice. During the Fund’s first five years, we have celebrated Black brilliance and worked to support Black people around Washington state in all of our collective beauty, tenderness, determination, and joy. We are people who make a way out of no way.

It is also true that our challenges are urgent and entrenched. Black people remain systemically under-resourced and marginalized, and even as current dangers escalate precipitously, these are new chapters in an old story. Racist systems exclude us from abundance and opportunity, and on a wide range of health, quality of life, and economic metrics, we fare worse. Stepping out the front door every day onto America’s unlevel playing field, we meet less access, less understanding, and more risk than the majority population, from the health clinic to the traffic stop.

We know how normal cruelty is in this society — as routine as the majority culture handwaving it away. We have never been compensated for the stolen labor that built white wealth in this country. Our bodies and spirits carry the weathering and trauma of generations. When we are included, that inclusion is often tokenizing, or at other times it is what Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor calls “predatory inclusion,”⁹ as when Black people gained access to homeownership on an extractive basis that did not lead to prosperity. Again and again, our humanity goes unseen and uncherished.



THE GENESIS OF THE FUND

To realize justice and abundance in the face of malevolent opposition calls for boldness and a leap of faith. Celebrating Black brilliance and normalizing Black humanity in *this* land, at *this* time ... it's nowhere close to simple. It wasn't in 2020. It's not in 2025. But the women who raised us were warrior-ancestors. Determined to support our people and send blessings forward to our future descendants, we began to inch toward this beautiful, imperfect undertaking, knowing that our steps might waver and wobble at times.

It was June 2020. Grief, anger, and loss rippled through our bodies, our communities, our nation. COVID-19 was spreading rapidly among friends and neighbors. Just weeks after George Floyd's murder, it was a time of widespread and intense racial reckoning. We four architects of the Fund are Black-bodied women who have all been harmed by a society founded on white supremacy. We have all known marginalization, struggle, and scarcity — and we also come from hope.

At that time, each of us was leading a nonprofit. Michelle was and still is the CEO of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. T'wina was then the CEO of the Tacoma Urban League, and now represents the 28th legislative district as its Washington state senator. Angela was the CEO of Washington STEM, and has since moved to direct the Washington State Initiative at the Gates Foundation. Andrea was then CEO of Byrd Barr Place, and today is co-founder and co-executive director of the BIPOC Executive Directors Coalition of Washington State.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder, we saw young activists in the street demanding justice. And as we offered support and supplies to the activists, we also asked ourselves: What will happen when these young people come off the streets? What jobs will they find? How can we fortify the Black-led organizations serving our communities?

Each of us had an existing relationship with the Seattle Foundation which, at that time, had just joined the All in Washington campaign to support COVID relief for the most affected communities in the state. They raised millions in days, energizing funders and peers. We knew that a six-month-old, pre-vaccine global pandemic was different from centuries of injustice. Sudden crisis mobilizes people. But the energy around the All in Washington campaign sparked our sense of what's possible.

When we saw those young Black activists rushing the steps of City Hall, we recognized that we could rush the steps of philanthropy on their behalf — not to tear it down, but to change it. For many years, we had witnessed how philanthropy's inequity and glacial pace of change disadvantages Black people and leaves chronic wounds unhealed. We wanted to form a theory-to-practice organization and demonstrate to equity-minded philanthropy that *this can be done differently*. Our wake-up challenge to philanthropy would not be one more conversation. This time we would show, not tell.

None of us came from the philanthropic sector, but we didn't let that stop us. As veteran nonprofit leaders and grantees, we began by asking Seattle Foundation to stand up a fund for our community. We thought "Hey, we'll do our part by asking. If they say no, at least we tried." When they said yes, we realized with a little dose of shock and trepidation, "We have to really do it now!"



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GETTING DOWN TO WORK

We began to develop our approach. Fridays were Fund days, and our team met every Friday for hours, sharing aspirations and dreams and strategies, giving shape to possibilities. We spoke of the warrior-ancestor-women who raised us and how we might embody this tradition of courageous love. We would model a new philanthropy that would not push Black organizations to the periphery, but instead cherish them and hold them at the heart of the work.

Black people are accustomed to walking uphill, fighting gravity for each hard-won inch of progress. We wanted to reverse that societal gravity and send funds flowing freely toward Black folks and communities. We wanted to offer our people an experience of abundance that feels easy.

Researching Washington history, we found only one example in the past 20 years of a similar idea for a fund dedicated to Black people, but market forces had prevented that fund from coming into existence. We viewed ourselves as standing on the shoulders of the elders who envisioned that fund in 2008. We sought them out for conversation and they blessed our new effort.

We chose the name Black Future Co-op Fund to express deep care about our people's future, grounded in a spirit of collaboration, healing, and repair. In Paul Wellstone's words, "We all do better when we all do better." We dreamed of offering Black people across Washington state what visionary author Orland Bishop calls "*sacred hospitality*."

The Black Future Co-op Fund came into being as a component fund of the Seattle Foundation. We launched with an initial goal of \$25M, and the first couple of years were full of hectic fundraising. We were disappointed that it took us over two years to raise \$25M, but we reminded ourselves that raising this amount specifically for trust-based philanthropy focused on Black communities had never been done in our state. We also knew that this amount is very small compared to what is needed.



After a whirlwind two years, we intentionally slowed down to be thoughtful about our strategic foundation, recognizing that how we work is just as important as what we work on. For those first two years, we four architects of the Fund had managed the work on a volunteer basis. To ensure the Fund's viability, we sacrificed rest, family time, and life opportunities. But as we brought in more funds and identified more grantees, the work increased, and we recognized it was time to staff up. In 2022, we added a CEO to lead and oversee the Fund (currently an interim managing director); a director of learning and community engagement to build relationships and facilitate networking across the state; a director of partner engagement and investment to focus on resourcing the Fund's mission, and an administrative associate to manage the day-to-day operations.

In addition, building on lessons learned from listening to communities around the state, we developed a three-year strategic plan organized around four areas of impact: connecting Black communities for collective power, promoting truthful Black narratives, investing in Black generational prosperity and well-being, and shifting the philanthropic paradigm.



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INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES

While we have now raised almost \$30M, we did not wait to reach our fundraising target before starting to disseminate funds. In 2021, we began making grants to Black-led nonprofits across the state, calling them We See You grants to let grantees know how much we appreciate them and the immense contributions they make to our communities.

We committed to giving each organization \$100,000 through an unrestricted multi-year grant. After exploring different giving cadences and gathering grantee feedback, we adopted an approach of disbursing an initial \$50,000, followed by \$10,000 annually over the next five years. Embodying our trust that Black people know what is needed in their communities, our We See You grants provide flexible funding for recipients to use as they see fit in order to best advance their work. No application process. No reports. Through these grants, the Fund has invested in Black-led nonprofits, Black nonprofit leaders, community organizations and, since 2024, Black businesses as well.

It takes time and diligence to identify Black organizations across the state, learn about their work, and ensure their readiness to receive funds. We are elated that we have been able to support 117 grantees so far. One recipient wrote, “Thank you for this extraordinary honor. Your trust — and the decision to make this support unrestricted — is an act of radical generosity and solidarity. It allows us to lead without constraint, plan with confidence, and dream beyond survival.” We have also sponsored Black community organizations hosting events like concerts, conferences, and arts festivals.

Our audacious goal is, over time, to fund every Black-led organization in Washington state. Our mantra is that “Everyone will be funded.” It’s a matter of when, not if. As we find you, and as we have the resources, we will invest.





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THE ROAD GETS BUMPY SOMETIMES

One of the Fund's pillars is telling truthful Black narratives, and that includes the hard parts. As nonprofit leaders, we learned early on to smile and spotlight successes. But our commitment is to not throw the truth behind the couch when the doorbell rings. We look back with much appreciation on our first five years, and we also recognize the times that we missed a step and lost our footing, or bumped up against the painful and unexpected.

This work — like any work — is not always a delight. Sometimes it can feel overwhelming and burdensome. The pain and struggles of our communities spur us on but also weigh heavy on our hearts. We keep fighting the same justice battles that previous generations fought. We choose this work, but challenges have arisen along the way.

Early in the process, we got a call from a celebrity artist's team saying that they wanted to also use the name Black Future. Our first instinct was to share the name, to feel that no one should own it. However, the legal agreement sent by the artist's team would have entailed us *signing over the rights* to the name that we had independently arrived at. This was disheartening and unacceptable to us. An attorney provided by the Seattle Foundation demonstrated that we used the name first and helped us to reach an agreement. We kept our name. The need for a legal process was disappointing, but sometimes claiming the space to exist requires tussling over turf.

We also faced backlash from within our community when a group of local leaders sent scathing emails to funders and the community at large, accusing the four of us of stealing their idea to start a similar fund. While there have been many conversations over time among Black community leaders exploring actionable ideas, our plan was born independently and spontaneously on a group phone call. We received personal insults in group emails, and our appeal for unity was met

with hostility and name-calling. It was a painful episode, and we could only stand in our truth, recognizing the gap between that truth and others' perceptions.

Along with external challenges that compelled us to defend ourselves, we also had the operational challenge of fundraising, repeatedly making our case and justifying the need for the Fund to funders, sometimes in draining circumstances that undermined our spirits. We are proud that we surpassed our initial goal, but it took several enervating years, during which we watched huge resources directed toward other issues while Black lives once again took a back seat.

There were internal dynamics to navigate as well. Whenever people come together to work, there is the possibility of moving in different directions, despite an initial shared goal. One staff member departed for another job only to continue collaborating with the Fund in a non-staff capacity. With another staff member, the need for a planful separation became clear. While this process was difficult and not what we originally envisioned, it was a necessary transition that we handled with care. Our team grew stronger as we clarified our collective commitment to holding this work.

The process of clarifying commitments also involved finding balance between rest and rigor. We knew that rest and self-care are vital in a healthy organization and urgently needed by Black women, including us. We recognized that we were deeply exhausted from prior jobs and everyday oppression, along with the demands of this new effort. While we accomplished much over the Fund's first five years, at times we were too loose and unstructured, not always discerning when to prioritize rest and when to prioritize rigor. We have keener eyes for this balance now, and systems to help sustain it.

COLLECTIVE WISDOM AND THE BLACK WELL-BEING STUDY

Working cooperatively is central to our vision. It takes all of us to dismantle inequitable systems and create community-based solutions so that future generations can be freer than we are today. We are committed to rooting the Fund's work in our collective community wisdom. Black people live dispersed throughout the state and it is vital to find ways to connect and share our knowledge, concerns and priorities. Since starting the Fund, we have steadily reached out to gather with and learn from Black Washingtonians, including through an online survey in our first year, as well as in virtual meetings and focus groups.

In 2022, when we staffed up, we knew that our funding needed to be grounded in an accurate understanding of the lived realities of Black Washingtonians across the state. Building on our earlier outreach, we now undertook a Black Well-being study, gathering statewide data through surveys and group interviews, along with researching existing quantitative data. Formulating a framework based on Byrd Barr Place's 2015 *Creating an Equitable Future in Washington State: Black Well-being & Beyond* report, we grouped data under the topics of civic engagement, education, economic mobility, public safety, and health. We wanted to see how Black Washingtonians were faring in these areas, and we needed to hear from the broadest possible cross-section, not just be guided by our own lived and professional experiences. We anchored our approach in a positive vision of the future – one that centers abundance rather than scarcity – and invited community members to identify strategies and tactics that would help us move toward realizing that vision.

After synthesizing data and perspectives from Black folks across the state, in 2022 we published our in-depth report and audiobook, *Black Well-being: Moving Toward Solutions Together*.¹⁰ It presented community-identified approaches intended to support organizing, inform policy change, and direct resources toward Black prosperity, health, and well-being. We called the report “a love note to Black Washingtonians, written for us and by us, to accelerate change.”



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The report planted an important flag. It provided valuable, first-person data describing the needs of Black Washingtonians in detail, while also modeling the way that trust-based philanthropy and rigorous data-gathering are fully compatible. Many large and established funders have not done the kind of data-gathering that we did as a novice philanthropic organization.

In addition to presenting wide-ranging data, the report explores contextual factors for each topic area. For example, the report frames health in terms of holistic well-being, discusses medical racism, and considers the true costs of health care. This kind of multidimensional context usefully frames the data, while community-identified approaches highlight priorities for investment and action, such as: Address ableism and racism in the healthcare ecosystem; fund Black-owned, initiated, and operated care; and address family and community, not just the individual.

One important part of the motivation for the Black Well-being report was to feature the diversity of voices, experiences, and approaches of Black people throughout Washington. Promoting truthful Black narratives is systems change work and it is central to our approach. By elevating Black voices, we counter harmful myths and distortions that serve to conceal the strengths, beauty and achievements of Black people. Another way that we have promoted truthful Black narratives is by organizing panels and conversations for Black Philanthropy Month to celebrate the ingenuity and generosity of Black philanthropy and inspire increased investment in Black communities.



STATEWIDE LISTENING TOUR

Centering Black well-being always begins with listening. After releasing the Black Well-being report, we knew that we would need to follow up and expand on that data with an exploration of how people are living those statistics — looking more deeply into successes as well as needs. We moved from our Black Well-being study into planning and carrying out our statewide listening tour in 2023 and 2024, which complemented and extended that earlier work.

At the Fund, we see family throughout Washington, and we approached the statewide listening tour as an opportunity to find and gather with our extended family. We know that Black people are not a monolith, and Black folks across all counties are not experiencing life in the same way. We set out to convene with Black community members in seven regional locations around the state to hear directly about their visions, challenges, and aspirations. As we wrote in the post-tour report, “Powerful Black-led work is happening across Washington state to promote Black well-being. While each region is distinct, in every place we visited, communities are connecting across intersecting issues to respond to immediate needs and address systemic root causes.”¹¹

It was important to travel through the state to build relationships and ensure that community members were genuinely interested in meeting with us. While we were consistently well-received, we needed to be sensitive to people’s differing priorities, as well as to the power dynamics of a funder inviting community members into conversation. We met with some organizations operating on a shoestring budget, and even when they considered our work important, it was hard for them to participate because of immediate urgent needs. We also needed to bring respectful care to community dynamics and local histories between organizations that we might know little about. Through the whole process, as we gathered with Fund grantees and not-yet-grantees, we tried to create a container in which Black people could speak truth and grow stronger together.

Ultimately, the listening tour deepened connections among participants across issues and geographies, affirmed common ground, and identified important themes, expanding on data from the Black Well-being study. We heard a resounding “Yes!” from Black people around the state about the work we are doing at the Fund. It was one solid step on the much larger journey toward Black well-being and prosperity. The below excerpt from our *2023-24 Listening Tour Report* highlights themes that we heard consistently across Washington:



- **Recognize that healing is essential.** People talked about the role of healing and, in particular, prioritizing mental health care and youth support, as integral to the work of racial and social justice.
- **Increase multiyear, unrestricted funding.** Organizations need flexible funding over five to 10 years to use as they see fit to advance their missions. As funders, we must reimagine our roles to work more collaboratively and creatively with nonprofits.
- **Support capacity building.** Foundations and other funders ought to expand their roles to help organizations raise money, as well as offer assistance and tools to support grant writing, financial management, communications, policy advocacy, human resources, and more.
- **Invest in Black leadership.** Black people want to see other Black people in their workplaces as peers, collaborators, mentors, and role models. It's past time we level the playing field and accelerate investment in education, training, apprenticeship, and other professional development. Employers must pay equitable wages, while making their workplaces welcoming and inclusive environments.
- **Fund advocacy and systems change.** To create the change we want to see, we must fund policy advocacy to change the systems and structures that perpetuate racial disparities — moving us toward an equitable world.¹¹

LOOKING FORWARD

One of the clear messages that emerged from our 2023-24 listening sessions is that Black community organizations around the state are engaged and activated — they're not waiting for an external savior. Their actions come from the conviction that we who are here today need to do this, so that future generations will not have to be in the work in this way.

We are inspired by the powerful, indispensable work of Black-led organizations around the state. In these first five years, we have been gratified to support so many wonderful Black-led organizations and leaders while modeling our approach to Black philanthropy. We have made a difference, and there is so much more to do.

We are heartened by the fact that most funders giving to the Black Future Co-op Fund are practicing trust-based philanthropy by offering multiyear support and trusting the Fund to direct disbursement of funds. We steadily advance our grantmaking work, and we are actively developing new ways for our grantees to gather, access resources, and grow stronger individually and together. We are also continuing our collaboration and conversations with Black funds around the nation, such as the California Black Freedom Fund, Minnesota Black Collective Foundation, and South Florida Racial Justice Table.

While we are still a small fund at this time, our goal is to raise \$246M. This amount represents \$1M for every year of institutional slavery in this country. Reaching this goal will enable us to establish an endowment to replenish and sustain the Fund's work into the future.

We mark our five-year anniversary at a time of great uncertainty and danger in this nation. We don't know what lies ahead, but we know that Black people have struggled, persevered, and changed the world, generation after generation. In times like these, we will not turn away, and we know we're not alone. We draw on the legacy and power of our ancestors as we work for our future descendants. We stand with those who stand with us today, moving together toward justice.

Out of love for our people — the true heart of philanthropy — we will go on making a way.

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