

I. Project Information*

Project Director	Oji Alexander
Project Title	Reclaiming the Narrative: Cultivating Black Innovation in Green Spaces
Project Location	<p>Our project will be implemented in three to five predominantly Black neighborhoods in New Orleans, Louisiana, which will be referred to as our “Sites of Innovation” for this proposal. New Orleans’ unique positioning along the Southeast coast has made it one of the primary locations for environmental hazards and disasters. While these challenges plague many neighborhoods, those with a prominence of Black residents are disproportionately impacted, which informs the reason for our selection. The three to five “Sites of Innovation” that will serve as potential sites for our project will be selected from the following areas within the city: Gentilly, the Upper 9th Ward, the East, Central City, and Pontchartrain Park. The criteria used for selecting these particular communities is informed by data that coincides with a term known as green gentrification, or the influx of environmental infrastructure projects in a neighborhood that leads to the “exclusion and displacement of politically disenfranchised residents” as noted by the Barcelona Laboratory for Urban Environmental Justice and Sustainability. All five of these areas have received a series of municipal and private green infrastructure projects in recent years. Simultaneously, these areas have also experienced the displacement of Black residents since Hurricane Katrina. One of our project goals is to explore potential causes of displacement caused by environmental projects, while providing an opportunity to address this pattern with our proposed intervention. These neighborhoods also contain a significant portion of youth within the elementary to middle school age range, and elders, which supports the description of our target community.</p>
Project Summary	<p>Reclaiming the Narrative: Cultivating Black Innovation in Green Spaces is a project created and led by WATER BLOCK™ and GLORY GARDENS that aims to engage youth and elders in predominantly Black neighborhoods in New Orleans in a design process to create their own</p>

small-scale installation that responds to an environmental challenge prevalent in their area. Collectively, the neighborhood project locations are referred to as the “Sites of Innovation.” Our project is founded on the principles of asset-based community engagement, which highlights the inherent value, strengths and potentials of community members to build their own capacity to address environmental hazards. This approach acknowledges that the people most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are the most equipped to devise solutions that are sustainable, accessible and culturally relevant. This project can serve as a model for future programming that incentivizes intergenerational relationship building through the process of research and innovation. The cultural history of natural resource management, adaptation and resilience in Black communities across the Gulf South positions these groups to design and implement adaptive strategies that promote climate resilient, and socially fortified communities.

II. Progress Report Questions

1. Please revisit your proposal and review your goals and the outcomes you were seeking to achieve through this grant. How successful were you in meeting your goals? Please assess your success against the criteria you set in your proposal and use any combination of anecdotes, stories, graphs, charts, visuals as well as data to explain your success. Upload supporting files if you choose.*

The intention outlined in the revised proposal and project narrative that the project lead approved in May of 2023 differed from the original proposal that is detailed here. The intended outcomes were to explore intergenerational relationship building as a means of improving community social cohesion, community safety and creating a sustained investment in ecological health via the development of a green infrastructure program and community green space.

GLORY GARDENS selected the upper 9th ward and a historic area of the Westbank of New Orleans which included the intersections of the McDonogh, Whitney, and Landry neighborhoods. Through partnerships with George Washington Carver High School, Thrive 9th Ward and grassroots leaders GLORY GARDENS worked with community members to develop a five phase plan to pursue these goals while remaining aligned with the principles of Asset Based Community Development and Engagement. Among these leaders are community assets Baba Malik Raheem, Sunni Patterson, Mrs. Rose McGowan, Karl Washington, Rev. Joe Willis, and Dwana Caliste. These leaders have been essential as a steering committee for the project as developed and implemented by GLORY GARDENS as indispensable to the trust building required for interest building and participant recruitment.

By the fall of 2023 GLORY GARDENS had begun to host workshops at Carver High School during the senior health class and to host monthly workshops for elders at the Thrive 9th ward community center. This recruitment strategy proved to be the most successful. Tulane University's Changemaker Institute has expressed interest in supporting the project's continuity, and the possibility of continuing to pursue the outcomes outlined in the revised proposal and narrative are being considered.

Optional File Upload

2. How has your work benefited your organization, professional field, community, or other stakeholders?*

The upper 9th ward community now has two green spaces secured to develop into multi-purpose green spaces that demonstrate innovative and historical green infrastructure technologies that were developed by members of the Gulf South's BIPOC community. GLORY GARDENS has benefited by building relationships and trust in the communities targeted for the project as well as by being able to develop curriculum for workshops with community assets as thought partners.

3. Are there any other successes related more broadly to this project that you would like to share with us?*

While the work will be halted again for my maternity leave, there's a strong foundation that's been laid among grassroots and grass tops community assets and community members in the targeted area. This foundation has taken time, but through the process of building authentic relationships the research goals are now shared goals with young people and elders, residents and institutions. Carver High School is now interested in having Green Infrastructure technical training and education as an offering for their students.

4. What did you learn (positive or negative) as a result of this grant? What lessons would you share with other organizations or the field at large?*

As a leader of an organization that I've worked diligently to build, I've learned to be more protective of GLORY GARDENS in the context of partnerships and hiring practices. I've also learned that a strong start often isn't an all out sprint and sustainable momentum is built up more slowly. Thirdly, I've learned that professionalism means to cultivate a culture that values the integrity of the work along with systems that guide us in honoring of the differing values, principles and life circumstances of the people we work with. As with any lesson there are events and results that are defined as losses. Because of these losses GLORY GARDENS had a few false starts, but a strong start that is sustainable is worth the wait.

The thing I would do differently is take more time off to stabilize my family instead of a few weeks. The result was that I ended up trying to chew more than I could manage and my efforts fell flat due to a lack of stability and organization. Instead of recruiting participants if I could redo the first half of 2023 I would have focused on subcontracting the meat of the work or hiring an interim director.

5. How do you characterize your relationship with the GRP and what suggestions do you have for improvement?*

I have deep appreciation for the guidance of the ICEM/GRP team. I think more frequent check-ins with the project teams, as opposed to the project lead would be beneficial. And interviews as opposed to solely on paper reporting would be good.

6. Please provide any other feedback or comments you have for the GRP.*

Thank you.

7. If applicable, please identify and describe the ways you or your organization leveraged GRP's grant (e.g., other funders, volunteers who worked on the program, in-kind donations etc.) Please specify the value and/or number/hours of volunteers if possible.

All funds were used for staff, tools to implement the interviewing processes, workshops, along with the lease fees for two sites, site designs and building material. Also, GLORY GARDENS contracted a local educator to develop customizable curriculum based in the research that can be used to continue the research or share with the school and/or community center. As a recruitment strategy GLORY GARDENS provided small installations and maintenance services for members of the steering committee and created a paid apprenticeship position for five young people, including a young woman, a formerly incarcerated young man.