

# BLACK VOICES, BLACK SPACES

THE POWER OF BLACK INNOVATION

echoing  
green

EQUIVOLVE  
— CONSULTING —

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is part of Echoing Green's Invest in Black Leaders storytelling campaign, which provides a pathway for communities, donors, and funders to act, and calls for sustained support for the Black innovators building a world where all people can thrive.

We hope the stories featured in this report motivate all people to support Black social change leaders and see a place for themselves as active participants in creating and contributing to a just and equitable world.

### ECHOING GREEN

**Cheryl L. Dorsey**, *President*  
**Lindsay Booker**, *Director, Communications*  
**Dabney Brice**, *Research & Equity Associate, Thought Leadership*  
**Brennan DuBose**, *Former Portfolio Manager, BMA Fellowship*  
**Soumya Misra**, *Content Specialist, Communications*  
**Liza Mueller**, *Vice President, Thought Leadership*  
**Tiffany Thompson**, *Senior Director, Partnerships & Equity, Thought Leadership and Former Portfolio Manager BMA Fellowship*

### EQUIVOLVE

**Glenn Love**, *Founder and CEO*  
**Nicole Jolly**, *Managing Director, Strategy*  
**Corey Murphy**, *Associate*  
**JaNay Queen Nazaire**, *Senior Advisor*  
**Nastacia Pereira**, *Associate*  
**Teja Vemuganti**, *Associate*

### EDITORIAL AND DESIGN TEAM

**Aeran Baskin**  
**Ahlgrim Design Group**  
**Nirmala Nataraj**  
**Pamela Thompson**

### BMA FELLOW INTERVIEWEES

**Oluwatoyin Ayanfondun '15**, *Founder & Executive Director, Tomorrow's Leaders NYC*  
**Felecia Hatcher '17**, *Co-Founder, Center for Black Innovation, CEO, Black Ambition*  
**William Jackson '14**, *Founder & Chief Dreamer, Village of Wisdom*  
**Jessica Johnson '12**, *Founder & Executive Director, The Scholarship Academy*  
**Mario Jovan Shaw '15**, *Co-Founder, Profound Gentleman; Founder, Messy Roots*  
**Gabe Leader Rose '18**, *Co-Founder, Good Call*  
**Laurin Leonard '18**, *Co-Founder, R3 Score & Mission: Launch*  
**Jordyn Lexton '15**, *Founder, Drive Change*  
**Thell Robinson '18**, *Founder & CEO, Halt Violence*  
**Darrell Scott '17**, *Co-Founder, PushBlack; Vice President, Media Investments & Acquisitions, Accelerate Change*

### OTHER INTERVIEWEES

**Cheryl L. Dorsey**, *President, Echoing Green*  
**Shawn Dove**, *Managing Partner, NewProfit, Founder, Corporation for Black Male Achievement*  
**Rafiq Kalam Id-Din**, *Founder & Managing Partner, Ember Charter Schools for Mindful Education, Innovation and Transformation*  
**Marcus Littles**, *Founder and Senior Partner, Frontline Solutions*  
**Decker Ngongang**, *Managing Director, Sall Family Foundation (Former Portfolio Manager, BMA Fellowship)*

### ADVISORY GROUP MEMBERS

**Melissa Bradley**, *Managing Partner, 1863 Ventures*  
**Jimmie Briggs**, *Principal, Skoll Foundation*  
**John Brothers**, *President, T. Rowe Price Foundation*  
**Charisse Conanan Johnson**, *CFA, Managing Partner, Next Street*  
**Jotaka Eaddy**, *Founder & CEO, Full Circle Strategies*  
**Decker Ngongang**, *Managing Director, Sall Family Foundation (Former Portfolio Manager, Echoing Green BMA Fellowship)*  
**Derick Pearson '17**, *Executive Director & President, Center for Black Innovation*  
**Jacques-Philippe Piverger**, *Co-Founder & Managing Partner, Ozone X Ventures*  
**Samantha Tweedy**, *President, Black Economic Alliance Foundation*  
**Aaron Walker**, *Founder & CEO, Camelback Ventures*

### ADDITIONAL THANKS

Additional thanks to Echoing Green team members **Joanna Helou**, **Alex Silverman**, and **Alexis Williams**, and Echoing Green BMA Fellows **Donnel Baird**, **Brandon Anderson**, and **Tanay Tatum-Edwards** for their contributions to this report.

### FUNDERS

Echoing Green is grateful for the support of lead sponsors **Comcast NBCUniversal** and **Barclays**, which allowed it to produce the *Black Voices, Black Spaces: The Power of Black Innovation* report. Additional thanks to: **Allstate Foundation**, **Bloomberg Philanthropies**, **General Atlantic**, and **Moody's**.

**ABOUT ECHOING GREEN:** For 35 years, Echoing Green ([echoinggreen.org](http://echoinggreen.org)) has been on the front lines of solving the world's biggest problems, raising up transformational leaders willing to speak truth to power and challenge the status quo. The organization finds emerging leaders with the best ideas for social innovation as early as possible and sets them on a path to lifelong impact. Echoing Green's community of nearly 1,000 social innovators includes past Fellows such as First Lady Michelle Obama and the founders of Teach For America, Center for Black Innovation, BlocPower, and One Acre Fund. Built and refined over three decades, Echoing Green discovers tomorrow's leaders today, and then funds, connects, and supports a new generation of social impact leaders.

**ABOUT EQUIVOLVE CONSULTING:** Equivolve is a Black-owned social research and strategy firm fueled by equity and driven by our belief in the abundant potential that exists around the world. We see equity as the means by which we achieve a just society where the gap between human potential and resources and opportunities no longer exists. The full activation of this potential as the greatest means to attaining a just, inclusive, and vibrant society where people have what they need to be their best selves. Our work - which uses innovative research, evaluation, and strategy approaches to help leaders and organizations drive equitable results - is exclusively in service of closing this gap.

# A LETTER FROM CHERYL L. DORSEY

In 2021, Shawn Dove wrote in his book *I Too Am America: On Loving and Leading Black Men and Boys*:

*“It is clear to me that one of the most vital roles the Black Male Achievement field can have over the next decade will be building partnerships that provide Black people the cover, the connectivity, the support, and the space to do their multifaceted racial and social justice work. We need to be in the business of lifting up the models of success in the field and spreading the word among the flock, like a farmer planting and harvesting.”*

Echoing Green has long believed that social innovation has the potential to seed and cultivate justice in our world. For a decade, we have identified and supported bold, early-stage, next-generation Black social innovators dismantling inequitable systems and advancing justice.

But there is no justice without recognition, trust, and commitment. The Black Male Achievement Fellowship taught Echoing Green what it means to trust Black leaders and commit to building a dynamic ecosystem that allows them to plant their visions and harvest value for all. We learned that trust is recognizing Black leaders on their terms, responding to their needs as if they were our own. We also learned that seeding justice is not a single act but a long-term commitment to serving our change agents and their visions.

As social innovation practitioners, it is in our power to create a nurturing ecosystem of unwavering support for Black leaders where consistent and long-term recognition, trust, and commitment are the expectation, not the exception. Black leaders’ innovations challenge the status quo and center justice for the common good. We owe it to ourselves to create an environment that allows their seeds to take root and flourish. The stakes are far too high if we do not.

**With Gratitude,  
Cheryl**

Cheryl L. Dorsey  
President and 1992 Fellow, Echoing Green



## INTRODUCTION

**In Black communities, social innovation is a well-worn pathway to liberation.** Black leaders often use social innovation to design their own futures, heal our society of historical wounds, and create a world that honors life. Their solutions have the power to defy the constraints of structural racism, anti-environmentalism, and economic inequality, identifying opportunities to produce new and shared public value to propel us all forward into a more just world.

Over the past decade, the research has painted a clear picture of the disparities (funding gaps, discrimination, differences in social networks) for Black leaders and communities. Despite the clear and present need for a significant shift in how the field views and supports Black leaders, recent research shows that long-term commitments to funding Black leaders and Black communities are still episodic at best. *Fast Company* highlights a post-2020 trend, naming that, after a brief streak, venture capital has “ditched” Black startups. The article states that post-2020 Black-founded startups saw record investments, “with quarterly funding commitments nearing or even topping \$1 billion. But according to new data from Crunchbase, VC funding has dropped significantly in the second quarter of 2022, down to just \$324 million.” This drop is not shocking to Black leaders. It only raises a recurring question: what is possible when the fields of social entrepreneurship and philanthropy build sustainable funding ecosystems at scale that affirm the genius of Black leaders, intentionally cede power, and infuse proximate leaders with the resources they need to develop and deploy solutions capable of changing our society?

Echoing Green, a leading organization in the social innovation field since 1987, and the Black Male Achievement (BMA) Fellowship, a historic initiative formed by Echoing Green in partnership with Open Society Foundations’ Campaign for Black Male Achievement, is one of the few examples of a long-term commitment to affirm Black social innovation. The BMA Fellowship, which ran from 2012-2020, provides a case study of what is possible when Black social innovators exist in an affirming, responsive environment of support and respect.

This report, created in partnership with Equivolve Consulting, explores the historical context of Black innovation, considers the current factors impacting Black leadership, and concludes with opportunities to fully activate and incubate Black innovation, all informed by learnings from Echoing Green Black Male Achievement Fellows. **This report is meant to encourage leaders and influencers of funding strategies within social entrepreneurship and philanthropy to reframe the dominant narratives of successful innovation, commit to creating a responsive culture and ecosystem, and expand the funding opportunities available to Black leaders.**



Success should be uninterrupted; Black-led organizations and social entrepreneurs should be able to define a life that’s never interrupted again by systemic racism and barriers to entry.

**FELECIA HATCHER**

*Co-Founder, Center for Black Innovation  
2017 Black Male Achievement Fellow*

# THE DEEP ROOTS OF BLACK SOCIAL INNOVATION

2018 BMA Fellow **Laurin Leonard** and Co-Founder of **Mission: Launch and R3 Score** never considered that prison would be in her family's story. Laurin's mother and 2018 BMA Fellow, **Teresa Hodge**, unexpectedly found herself with an 87-month prison sentence for a first-time, nonviolent, white-collar offense. Teresa's 87-month sentence and post-release reentry became an all-in family journey. Laurin and Teresa quickly discovered that contact with the criminal justice system leaves the formerly incarcerated and their families vulnerable. Although 1-in-3 Americans have a criminal record, the transition out of prison is marked by a lifelong battle with finding suitable work, accessing housing, and even pursuing educational opportunities.

Dissatisfied with the status quo, Laurin and Teresa launched **R3 Score**, the **only** directly impacted, minority woman-owned background check vendor that seeks to ensure that a person's past doesn't define their lives. R3 Score leverages technology to offer an alternative to traditional criminal background checks, disrupting barriers to inclusion for people living with criminal records. R3 Score is remarkable because it promulgates hope, providing a mechanism for millions of American families to access self-sufficiency and dignity.

Laurin and Teresa are part of a larger story of the union of innovation and liberation in Black communities. Since the **founding of this country**, Black leaders have used **social innovation** as a framework for building collective power, dismantling entrenched racist and inequitable systems, and creating new value. Innovation defied segregation and fueled the Montgomery Bus Boycott as visionary organizers foreshadowed Uber, galvanizing Black taxi drivers and community members to develop a **private taxi service** to ensure that boycotters could get to work. **The Black Panther Party** changed the narrative for Black families in racially hostile environments by creating community-led oases of culturally affirming learning, similar to 2014 BMA Fellow **William Jackson's** work with Black parents at **Village of Wisdom** creating ideal learning environments for Black students. In the face of white supremacy, deeply rooted hostility, and little support, Black leaders have always been the architects of their own social, cultural, and economic liberation. They show us what's possible when we oppose unjust conditions and design solutions that value life, envisioning a better future for Black communities and the world. **When funders commit resources to Black leaders in proportion to the problems they are solving, the possibilities for impact are profound.**



**MEET A FELLOW:****ALEX PEAY**

PHILADELPHIA, PA

2016 FELLOW

CO-FOUNDER, **ONES UP**

Through a career development program rooted in healing and social justice, Ones Up builds the economic mobility of Black and Brown young people between the ages of 16-24.

**WHAT IS THE NEW WORLD YOUR ORGANIZATION IS REIMAGINING?**

We are shifting power! Putting young people at the forefront of creating solutions for upward mobility in Black and brown communities, Ones Up is challenging traditional career development programming by focusing not only on the skills of young people but their wellness.

“The ability to live out my passion, and use my ideas and creativity to disrupt generational and systemic barriers, brings me joy. Every day I wake up knowing that my ancestors are proud of me.”

**KIPP** NORTH PHILADELPHIA  
ACADEMY



A close-up portrait of Jessica Johnson, a Black woman with short dark hair, smiling warmly. She is wearing a teal lace top and a necklace made of light-colored, irregularly shaped stones. Her earrings are small, round, and light-colored. The background is dark and out of focus.

**MEET A FELLOW:**

## **JESSICA JOHNSON**

ATLANTA, GA

2012 FELLOW

### **THE SCHOLARSHIP ACADEMY**

The Scholarship Academy is a comprehensive scholarship preparatory program that helps low-income, first-generation college students secure resources to navigate higher education opportunities with minimum debt.

“The opportunity to be “seen” by the next generation of Black innovators brings me joy. Growing up, I rarely “saw” Black innovators in my small community. Because of my fellow laborers, who are “leaving the light on,” the entrepreneurial journey for young people today might be a little easier.”

# A CASE FOR WHAT'S POSSIBLE: THE IMPACT OF THE BLACK MALE ACHIEVEMENT FELLOWSHIP

In 2006, New York Times journalist Erik Eckholm's influential *Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn* painted a sobering picture—rising rates of incarceration, high unemployment, low-quality education—of the life experiences of Black men and boys in the United States. For Shawn Dove, the article was personal, reflecting the realities he witnessed growing up in New York City in the 1960s and 70s. As program officers at Open Society Foundations (OSF), Shawn and his colleague, Rashid Shabazz, understood that leveraging the practices and promise of social innovation had the potential to counteract historical inequities and help Black men and boys achieve the long-promised American Dream.<sup>2</sup>

Like the Black social innovators before them, Shawn and Rashid realized that the path of healing and liberation for millions of Black men and boys would require partnership. Echoing Green had a record of partnering with funders like the Jerome L. Greene Foundation and the Barclays Foundation to invest in social entrepreneurs and innovators. In 2011, Shawn, Rashid, and Echoing Green President Cheryl Dorsey envisioned the Black Male Achievement (BMA) Fellowship, seeking to intentionally infuse millions of dollars into proximate, social entrepreneurs building organizations that would better the life outcomes of Black men and boys in the United States.

Between 2012 and 2020, Echoing Green invested more than \$6 million in 90 BMA Fellows in 40 cities across the United States. BMA Fellows would raise nearly \$65 million over their active fellowships and instigate far-reaching change across multiple sectors, including clean energy, healthcare, education, and technology.



In speaking with more than 15 Fellows and other field leaders to generate this report and calls to action, it became clear that the BMA Fellowship deeply impacted the Fellows and their organizations, as well as Echoing Green as an organization and the fields of social innovation and philanthropy.

Echoing Green's social innovator support approach is threefold: Capital, Capacity, and Community, and the impact of the BMA Fellowship can be illustrated through the same framework.

In terms of **Capital**, Echoing Green facilitated the direct transfer of \$6M of philanthropic funding to leaders working to improve the life outcomes of Black men and boys and Black communities. But when the organization launched the BMA Fellowship, 2012 BMA Fellow **Cole** reflected, "Echoing Green wasn't fully ready for the implications of what introducing a Black male achievement Fellowship would be like" for the field of social innovation.

Echoing Green quickly realized that these leaders faced distinct structural challenges in accessing additional capital for their organizations. Various strategies were piloted to facilitate Fellow and funder relationships, with the goal of those relationships being eventual follow-on capital. However, none produced meaningful results for the community as a whole. Over those years, Echoing Green collected Fellow fundraising data, which led to a partnership with Bridgespan to develop and publish *Racial Equity and Philanthropy: Disparities in Funding for Leaders of Color Leave Impact on the Table*.

The findings included that in 2019, the revenues of Black-led organizations were 24% smaller than the revenues of their white-led counterparts, and the unrestricted net assets of the Black-led organizations were 76% smaller than their white-led counterparts.

As Echoing Green President Cheryl Dorsey often says, "the data went off like a bomb in the sector because numbers don't lie." Deborah Goldfarb, Global Head of Citizenship at Barclays and long-time funding partner of Echoing Green, noted, "The findings underscored the need to meet the moment and emphasized the barriers that exist for Black and ethnically diverse leaders. By partnering with organizations like Echoing Green, who have a strong track record of impact, we can take action to build a more inclusive and equitable society."

“

The BMA Fellowship was well before its time. Investing intentionally in Black communities made it easier for us to do good work.”

**JESSICA JOHNSON**

Founder, *The Scholarship Academy*  
2012 BMA Fellow

When examining **Capacity**, the reflections of BMA Fellows illustrate how the BMA Fellowship became an exemplar of unapologetic commitment to Black communities, raising the expectation for how to value and support Black leadership in the social sector. While the value of philanthropic support to Fellows topped out at \$6M, the estimated true value of support provided through the Fellowship was more than \$22M when including the \$80,000 in unrestricted seed funding, leadership development support led by a dedicated portfolio manager, and access to pro bono support from leading professionals to build organizational capacity.

Without question, Echoing Green's investments embody the essence of capacity building: increase any organization's ability to fulfill its mission. However, Echoing Green's most significant capacity-building learning was the need to prioritize, center, and support wellbeing. Echoing Green saw firsthand the unfair burden Black leaders had as they continued to find themselves, as **Kathryn Finney**, 2016 Echoing Green Fellow and CEO of **Genius Guild** puts it, "**explaining racial politics**" to funders and investors.

While Capital and Capacity were vital to these early-stage social innovators, one of the greatest assets of the Echoing Green Fellowship was the **Community** itself. Fellows built a robust community where they could bring the fullness of who they were and connect with others who shared similar experiences while navigating the social innovation ecosystem.

For Echoing Green to truly embrace social innovation as a well-worn pathway to liberation, it needed to create the space for Fellows to exist in a supportive and liberatory environment where they could bring their unfettered selves, forge meaningful relationships, and build the social capital needed to bolster the advancement of their organizations.

Many Fellows recounted catharsis and validation from being able to exist as their authentic selves in spaces with other Black leaders. The built community was reflective of the "maroon space" Black ancestors built: a supportive and liberatory environment free from oppression for Black leaders. While mentions of maroon spaces date back to around 1655, the heart of what made them so powerful then and now is freedom.

BMA Fellows expressed that the space recognized and nurtured the genius of Black leaders while simultaneously getting out of the way to let them innovate on their own terms. 2018 BMA Fellow Laurin



Leonard notes that “Echoing Green acknowledged the importance of Black life and led the ecosystem in naming Black leadership.”

## LEARNING AND SHIFTING

The lessons from the BMA Fellowship, and the BMA Fellows themselves, pushed Echoing Green to change its ethos around race, proximity, and support. The organization recognized that a justice orientation is necessary to progress toward a world free of systemic inequities. It learned that to truly create space for fully supported Black leadership, Echoing Green had to challenge its entrenched structures and assumptions, understand the power dynamics within the organization and the sector, and pursue a different way of investing in Black leadership.

Despite the BMA Fellowship’s impact, Echoing Green never achieved a fully funded program at scale after OSF’s initial investment. Interest in funding robust fellowship programs, particularly those focused on early-stage racial justice work, was virtually non-existent. In early 2020, amid a global pandemic and just before another outcry for racial justice, Echoing Green made the difficult decision to sunset several programs, including the BMA Fellowship, due to lack of support. It committed to working on weaving the lessons from the Fellowship - the way the organization was learning to offer Capital, Capacity, and Community in service of liberation - into the organization as a whole.

The summer of 2020 brought an extraordinary surge of pledges to fund racial justice work and remarkable change to Echoing Green and the elevation of the Fellows. In response to the racial justice uprisings, Echoing Green’s President Cheryl Dorsey penned an impassioned plea to philanthropy, *Meeting this Moment: Five Strategies to Move Forward Together*. That same month, Echoing Green launched the *Racial Equity Philanthropic Fund* (REPF), an organization-wide shift to racial equity, the organization’s largest-ever fundraising campaign, and an opportunity to increase Echoing Green’s volume and pace of funding to racial equity leaders by 1000%. The \$75 million REPF provides the organization with enough capital to select 120 new Fellows focused on racial equity, provide follow-on funding support to existing Fellows, and ushers in a new chapter in Echoing Green’s mission.



For years, people underestimated Halt Violence. When I received the Echoing Green Fellowship, it gave me the confidence to face each day with my head up.”

**THELL ROBINSON '18**

*Founder, Halt Violence*

Looking back on the last decade, it is clear that the impact of the BMA Fellowship will endure and that the field of philanthropy and social entrepreneurship must and can do better by Black social innovators. The implications of the BMA Fellowship represent a call to action for the field to be more equitable, sustainable, and just. **Considering these lessons, Echoing Green offers the following calls to action:**

### **REFRAME**

**Support Black joy and imagination by recognizing the social innovators who are implementing community solutions that will disrupt the world as we know it.**

### **COMMIT**

**Fund from a place of abundance. Commit to funding and supporting Black communities and Black leaders for the long-term.**

### **EXPAND**

**Diversify funding and support opportunities available to Black innovators.**

---

**These calls to action encapsulate many of the lessons learned from the BMA Fellows across a decade of investment. These suggestions are not an all-inclusive task list; instead, they offer a seedbed for a sustainable ecosystem that fully activates Black social innovation.**



# CALLS TO ACTION: LIBERATORY PRACTICES IN FUNDING SPACES

---

## REFRAME WHO IS SEEN AS AN INNOVATOR AND WHO GETS TO TAKE RISKS

---

### RECOGNIZE BLACK INNOVATORS

In 2011, Oluwatoyin Ayanfodun (Toyin) founded *Tomorrow's Leaders NYC* (TLNYC) to protect over-age middle school students from an education system that consistently overlooked their potential. In Toyin's hometown of Brooklyn, New York, dropout rates for students held back a grade are 11 times higher than their on-track peers. For 10 years, TLNYC has helped 2,000 students across New York defy the statistics, helping 95% graduate from middle school and 75% increase their grade point average.

However, despite TLNYC's outsized impact, Toyin bootstrapped TLNYC for 10 years, launching TLNYC with \$2,000 of his own funds. Within the organization's first four years, Toyin had only raised \$100,000, including Echoing Green's \$80,000 of unrestricted fellowship support. He has yet to secure adequate funding to support TLNYC at scale consistently. He notes:

*"It has been a struggle to get consistent support. I believe that some of it is because I am a Black man. There are certain spaces where I know I'm not getting funding before I say anything. There's an unspoken bias for people like myself. When you don't fit a particular profile, it is much harder to be considered for funding."*

Toyin struggles with four critical barriers identified in Echoing Green's *Racial Equity and Philanthropy* report. The report names the root of these struggles as a lack of trust. This unspoken lack of trust conjures a simple question: **who does the field trust to innovate?**

The lack of trust speaks to the prevailing narrative within social entrepreneurship and philanthropy that a successful social entrepreneur is *still* white, male, and American. Overwhelmingly, the field was not built to recognize Black leadership or trust their ability to innovate.

Quantifying investments in Black non-profit leaders paints a bad picture. As noted in the *Financial Times*, Creative Investment Research (CIR) found that “271 US corporations have pledged \$67 billion towards racial equity since Floyd’s murder, with funds to be used for everything from overhauling their own internal recruiting and inclusion programmes to investing in communities of colour and donating to civil rights organisations.”

But as of January 2022, only 1 percent of these pledges have been dispersed. As Tides CEO *Janiece Evans-Page* said, “it’s nearly impossible to know where all of that money has gone and exactly who benefited from it.”

What we do know is that the problem is impacting Black leaders like Toyin, who are innovating toward equity, inclusion, and liberation. Like TLNYC, their solutions are proximate to the communities they serve. Toyin lives in the community he serves. He dreams and builds impact there. However, his legitimacy to lead and capacity to innovate aren’t merely products of proximity. Toyin’s solutions and leadership demonstrate the trust he’s cultivated because he sees his liberation in the liberation of the youth in his community. Toyin is the community.

“

I think the radical idea, which shouldn’t be that radical, is that the people who have been the subject of the injustice, oppression, and marginalization have the solutions to the problems that those things created. In some ways, the most innovative thing I’ve done is to embrace the idea that I can contribute solutions to the problems that have beset my people.”

**RAFIQ R. KALAM ID-DIN II, ESQ.**

Founder, *Ember Charter Schools for Mindful Education, Innovation, and Transformation*,  
2007 Fellow



Who better to trust to design the solutions that a community needs than someone who has walked a similar path and dedicated their life to serving the community as part of that community?

This “**unspoken [resource] bias**” against Black leaders as innovators leaves Black-led organizations consistently and pervasively underfunded and **impact unrealized**.

The resources are available. But the field will never achieve its desired impact until it reframes the definition of a successful innovator to include Toyin and other Black leaders who are daily bootstrapping unparalleled community-driven impact.

## UPHOLD THE FREEDOM TO DREAM

In 2007, during a routine traffic stop, 2018 BMA Fellow **Brandon Anderson’s** partner was killed by the hands of police. As Brandon describes, the “radical and unapologetic” love of his partner radically changed his life and became the catalyst to change the lives of Black people in communities across the United States.

In 2017, Brandon founded **Raheem** as the only independent service for reporting police in the United States. Less than 5 percent of people file a complaint against police officers, which creates an inaccurate picture of conditions for policymakers. Raheem sought to create an accurate picture of policing and change policy by connecting people to free advocacy networks that can file a complaint on their behalf. Because of Raheem, thousands of people filed complaints in over 220 cities across the United States. Brandon’s aim was simple: “hold cops accountable and make every place safe for all Black people.”

Since the global uprising that followed the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020, Brandon and countless other Black organizers moved away from police reform and towards abolition, emboldened by communities across the country organizing for safety without police involvement. For Brandon, this is a world that mediates conflict with care, not violence, and affirms life. It’s also a world that has yet to exist.

Black innovators like Brandon deserve the freedom, time, and space to iterate and dream of new solutions (sometimes deemed as the space to take “risks”). In reality, this unobstructed space is rarely afforded to Black leaders, whose white counterparts are likelier to fail forward as they take risks and try untested ideas.

For Black leaders, the fallout of “risk-taking” and iteration can be costly. Laurin Leonard, 2018 BMA Fellow, explains:

*“We will never get million-dollar, billion-dollar businesses that are led by proximate leaders, by Black leaders, until people have the stomach to fund the thing that doesn’t look like it’s going to make it yet because the reality is that most of [Black social innovators] do not come from the families that have a safety net to throw an extra \$20,000, \$30,000, in when no one believes in you. When no one else believes in a Black leader, usually that business dies.”*

Reflecting on the BMA Fellowship experience, Fellows expressed the importance of having a leadership development environment where their humanity and ability were not called into question, nor were they asked to fit white-centered norms of perfection or respond to pressures to change or dilute their visions.

Shawn Dove, Managing Partner at NewProfit and Founder of the Corporation for Black Male Achievement, reminds us “that failure can be our friend. When we look at the private sector and how long it takes to show a profit and the tolerance to show a profit, it is not equally exhibited in the social sector. For Black leaders in the social sector, there must be room for failure, experimentation, and learning.”

Learning and refining ideas is social innovation operating at its best. With the room to explore and ask questions, Raheem evolved from its initial purpose as an independent reporting service. After analyzing more than 2,700 complaints, ranging from verbal altercations to neglect, Brandon asked himself a new question: **“what would it take to keep cops from killing people in the first place?”** Brandon saw Raheem’s contribution to a society without police brutality as creating a way to help people in crisis without involving the police. Now, Raheem leverages community organizers and technology to offer an alternative dispatching system to 911. **Brandon explains:**

*“We understand how hard it is for people to move from police reform to the end of policing altogether. And I think we really don’t expect people to move simply because we have a compelling resource, either. We know that part of our work is helping people to understand our evolution.”*

**This is the work of social innovators: taking the risks that help us all to ask new questions, envision new possibilities, and evolve.**

## **REFRAME**

**Support Black joy and imagination by recognizing the social innovators who are implementing community solutions that will disrupt the world as we know it.**

**Recognize Black innovators:** Elevate proximity and community buy-in as irreplaceable assets when selecting and supporting initiatives that support Black communities.

**Extend the Freedom to take risks:** Create an ecosystem of support for Black leaders that elevates risk-taking as an asset to transformative innovation, not an obstacle.



BOSTON, MA

---

2019 FELLOW

---

**FOUNDER,  
RHYMES WITH REASON**

Through an e-learning app, Rhymes with Reason helps students who attend Title I schools and read below grade level learn English words and build reading skills through music lyrics.


---

**WHAT IS THE NEW WORLD YOUR  
ORGANIZATION IS REIMAGINING?**

We are reimagining the power of Black music. By using popular music, Rhymes with Reason provides an engaging and equitable solution to vocabulary access and highlights the intellectualism of Black music in a universally understandable way.

MEET A FELLOW:

**AUSTIN MARTIN**

A portrait of Austin Martin, a man with dark curly hair, smiling, wearing a dark blue blazer over a black t-shirt. He has his arms crossed.

“ Being a Black innovator brings me joy because innovation taps into the core of my existence as a Black person. Despite having little to no resources, rights, and precedents, the ability to innovate is woven within our DNA. The ability to continue the legacy of my ancestors gives me purpose.”

OAKLAND, CA

2015 FELLOW

CO-FOUNDER,  
**FLOURISH AGENDA**

Flourish Agenda is a mighty team of trainers, researchers, and educators that equips schools, youth-serving organizations, foundations, local governments, youth, and their families, with tools and strategies that allow young people of color to flourish.

WHAT IS THE NEW WORLD  
YOUR ORGANIZATION IS  
REIMAGINING?

We are reimagining a world where all Black people (ultimately all people) have the freedom to experience belonging, love and joy.

MEET A FELLOW:

**NEDRA  
GINWRIGHT**

“The opportunity to ask “what if” brings me joy. This question pushes what seems impossible into the realm of possibility and has allowed me to implement ideas that don’t already exist.”

---

## COMMIT TO BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE ECOSYSTEM OF SUPPORT

---

In 2020, amid uprisings against racial violence, state-based brutality, and the pandemic's disproportionate economic and health impacts on communities of color, droves of corporate and philanthropic institutions pledged over \$67 billion to support and fund racial equity. Overnight, BMA Fellows, who struggled for years to attract attention from philanthropists, received an outpouring of support from funders who previously ignored them and their work.

For 2017 BMA Fellows and **Center for Black Innovation** Co-Founders **Felecia Hatcher** and **Derick Pearson**, before 2020, many funding conversations were over before they began. "Fundors were not interested," Felecia says, but within months of the murder of George Floyd, "our phones didn't stop ringing."

Felecia asks a painful question, "why now?"

Black innovators like Felecia, Derick, and the BMA Fellows highlighted in this report have always existed. Nor is Black social innovation a new phenomenon. Black social innovation is deeply ingrained in the American story because liberation is a central theme in African American history. However, the response to the high-profile police murders of Black people in America in 2020, compounded by national and global political turmoil and racial-justice uprisings, showed us that existing infrastructures within

“In the midst of a national reckoning with race, I felt like I was drinking from a firehose—struggling to keep up in the moment and trying to get as much water as I could because I didn't know when the hose would be turned off.”

**LAURIN LEONARD**

*Co-Founder, Mission: Launch and R3 Score, 2018 BMA Fellow*



philanthropy are not equipped with the tools and knowledge to identify and support transformative leaders or move the needle forward to solve age-old problems. If the field had the structures in place to identify leaders like Felecia and Derick and adequately support and resource them, Felecia and Derick would have had consistent funder interest before 2020 and, perhaps, solutions to some of those age-old problems.

2020's influx of interest in Black leaders, who have always been here, is an example of historical cycles of heightened attention and reactionary funding. Traditionally followed by both retrenchment and backlash, these cycles ultimately speak to a lack of trust in and commitment to building enduring infrastructure that honors Black innovation and life.

Philanthropy must move away from reactive funding to becoming active participants in fueling Black liberation to build infrastructure grounded in trust and commitment. As an organization that believes in listening to proximate leaders, Echoing Green recognized it needed to adjust its own culture and operations to move away from the white norms that dominate philanthropy, entrepreneurship, and innovation—including centering funders' needs rather than those of innovators. These characteristics influenced program design, decision-making, and power distribution within Echoing Green and impacted the delivery of programs. The BMA Fellowship required Echoing Green to rethink how it supported Black leaders, beyond and different from how philanthropy gives support in white-dominant spaces, and to ask itself hard questions, like: **What does it mean to be dedicated to Black leadership? What does it look like to be in solidarity with Black communities? What does it mean to listen and commit to Black leadership?**

Like Echoing Green, funders and decision-makers must consider what it means to listen to and genuinely commit to Black leaders in solidarity with their visions for Black liberation. This requires funders and leaders to examine their internal culture and funding decisions to determine whether they reflect the inequities they seek to eliminate. **Jessica Johnson**, 2012 BMA Fellow and Executive Director of The Scholarship Academy, notes that investment in leaders must “not [be] just on paper.” Solidarity is a threefold commitment: listening and responding to Black leaders, investing in internal

“

Most Black folks are third to fourth-generation innovators. We bring a legacy of innovation just to survive.”

**MARCUS LITTLES**

*Founder and Senior Partner,  
Frontline Solutions*

staff capacity to build authentic relationships, and committing to challenging internal and funding practices that uphold inequity.

When funders and leaders are genuinely committed to listening and trusting Black leaders, leaders like Felecia and Derick will experience consistent support, not reactionary, one-time gifts made in moments of outcry.

## COMMIT

**Fund from a place of abundance. Commit to funding and supporting Black communities and Black leaders for the long-term.**

- Listen and respond** to Black leaders.
- Dedicate resources and support** that are highly flexible and responsive, including allocating space and time to build community and connection amongst the leaders.
- Identify and change** internal and funding practices that uphold inequity.

**MEET A FELLOW:****XAVIER  
ALLEN  
HENDERSON**

DALLAS, TX

2020 FELLOW

**CO-FOUNDER, FOR OAK CLIFF**

For Oak Cliff provides culturally responsive initiatives in South Oak Cliff to liberate the community from systemic oppression, create a culture of education, and increase social mobility and social capital.

**WHAT IS THE NEW WORLD  
YOUR ORGANIZATION IS  
REIMAGINING?**

At For Oak Cliff, we are redefining what service, leadership, and impact can look, sound, and dress like by elevating leadership from Black communities.

“The ability to serve my people, with my people, brings me joy. When I can create avenues and opportunities for Black dreams, creativity, and joy to thrive, I know I am at peace living out my life’s purpose.”

OAK CLIFF



---

## EXPAND: FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE TO BLACK SOCIAL INNOVATORS

---

Since 2011, community organizer and social innovator **Donnel Baird** has been working to rapidly green low-income communities in America. While the mission of his company, **BlocPower**, is to turn every home in low and middle-income communities into the equivalent of a Tesla, simply put, BlocPower brings highly efficient and affordable clean energy to low-income communities through retrofits that developers and governments do not prioritize.

For Donnel, taking on this work was more than a business venture; it was personal. When he was growing up, Donnel's family lived in a building where residents were forced to turn on their stoves to compensate for ineffective heating. Later, as a community organizer in Brownsville, Brooklyn, he saw firsthand the impact of dirty and out-of-date heating and electrical systems in schools where asthma rates in children were often above 50%.

As he designed BlocPower's solution and prepared to launch, Donnel knew that the funding for BlocPower couldn't come solely from philanthropy, so he launched BlocPower as a Public Benefit Corporation, granting him the flexibility to partner with utilities, government agencies, and building owners. Over the last ten years, he raised over \$100 million for the organization. His first financial backing came in 2012 when he was selected for the inaugural cohort of Echoing Green's BMA Fellowship.



We have what we have because there's been a lack of investment in Black visionaries and entrepreneurs. Many of the social problems that continue to exist in Black communities have had generational cycles and could have been disrupted. If there would've been the kind of investment we see in white organizations and leaders, many of these social problems would be sunseting. We would've seen a true Renaissance. The lack of investment in Black entrepreneurs and visionaries means we miss an opportunity to reimagine our world and society in a truly holistic and long-term way.”

**RAFIQ R. KALAM ID-DIN II, ESQ.**

*Founder, Ember Charter Schools for Mindful Education, Innovation, and Transformation,  
2007 Fellow*

Today Donnel is seen as one of the most high-profile Black CEOs. With backing from philanthropy, government agencies, and venture capitalists, BlocPower has taught 1,000 BIPOC leaders how to install green infrastructure, completed retrofits in more than 1,500 buildings and over 5,000 homes in New York City, and additional projects are underway in 24 cities. Ithaca, NY, and Menlo Park, California, have even joined Donnel's bold and ambitious plan, declaring all buildings in their respective cities will become 100% carbon-neutral by 2030.

As demonstrated by Donnel's success, for major infrastructure like energy supply to be built with Black leaders and communities, philanthropy cannot be their sole source of capital. Expanded funding opportunities like pooled funds and other community-led and catalytic approaches to raising massive amounts of capital can close the funding gaps that have existed for Black-led organizations for decades.

**MEET A FELLOW:****AMANDA  
ALEXANDER****DETROIT, MI****2017 FELLOW****FOUNDER,  
DETROIT JUSTICE CENTER**

The Detroit Justice Center (DJC) believes we cannot build cities that work for everyone without ending mass incarceration and fostering a new economic vision. DJC provides legal services to keep people out of jail and prison, guides path-breaking economic programs like community land trusts and co-ops to build power in neighborhoods, and nurtures visionary solutions such as restorative justice hubs and community reinvestment.



**Listening to Black people talk about their visions and dreams for their neighborhood brings me so much joy. I love when the DJC team can help make those dreams a reality.”**



Supporting Black innovation requires funders and asset allocators to consider what long-term support Black leaders need to build momentum, sustain impact, and then respond to those capital needs by meeting Black leaders where they are. Justice invites funders and leaders to ask a new set of questions:

**Who Controls Assets?** According to the **Council on Foundations**, only 10.3% of CEOs and leaders of surveyed foundations are people of color. Making massive and long-term investments in Black leaders and communities requires funders and leaders to directly address the power imbalance that favors funders and perpetuates a cycle of funding decisions being made for Black communities by disconnected and predominately white decision-makers. Shifting this paradigm demands that funders meaningfully participate in a significant push so that investment managers, program directors, and board members more closely resemble the communities they serve.

Funders can also look to communities for guidance. Taking funding decisions out of boardrooms and placing them into communities puts power into the hands of the people who are doing the work to envision and build their future. It also creates space for **communities, not funders, to define their most urgent needs and identify the resources, individuals, and organizations that are best suited to meet those needs.**

Shifting who controls assets isn't easy because it means giving up power. But without shifting who controls and deploys assets, we are in danger of making the same anemic investments into leaders and organizations that don't share the same visions of justice as Black communities and, ultimately, thwart our movement forward as a society.

**How Do We Best Meet Leaders Where They Are?** Historically, the dynamic between Black social innovators and philanthropy has been one where the innovators shift and adjust to funders to get support for their bold visions. What impact could be possible if that dynamic shifted? Catalytic capital has the potential to meet visionary Black leaders where they are. **Debra Schwartz** of the MacArthur Foundation describes catalytic capital as “patient, flexible, risk-tolerant financing [that] [s]ometimes accepts lower returns to accommodate the economics of high-impact organizations that are profitable but not profit-maximizing, whether due to an early stage of business development, tough markets, or a focus on impoverished populations.” Options like catalytic capital give Black-led organizations an opportunity to prove and substantiate an idea. It also signals to other more risk-averse funders that it is safe to invest in a vision.



**What Is Required to Build Bridges Between Communities & Assets?** When funders and leaders lament that it is difficult to find Black-led organizations to invest in, it communicates that they have judged the leadership they found unworthy of investment. 2004 Global Fellow **Takema Robinson** of Converge for Change **explains**:

*“How fundamentally racist is it to say that we’re not going to fund Black-led orgs closest to the ground because they don’t have capacity, when we intentionally under-funded them? It’s on us. This paradox about who is fundable is the manifestation of choices we made that are rooted in white supremacy—that white leaders are better leaders, that they make better organizations. Over time that becomes true because we have funded it to be true. We have to flip the script from putting the onus on organizations that we have continuously under-funded.”*

Black communities are teeming with innovative and world-changing leadership and vision. Philanthropy’s inability to recognize and trust these leaders is a failure of funders and leaders, not Black communities.

This is where philanthropy can better support and leverage intermediaries like Echoing Green, **NewSchools Venture Fund**, and **Camelback Ventures**. Barclays, long-time funders of Echoing Green, understands this well. For over a decade, they have been at the forefront in partnership with Echoing Green to create a path for Black leaders. They have understood the power of Black-led organizations like Echoing Green which have the capacity and knowledge to build long-term, robust, and authentic relationships with Black leaders and communities.

## EXPAND

**Diversify funding and support opportunities available to Black innovators.**

**Change the funding and investments** you make in Black leaders to be catalytic capital: patient, risk-tolerant, substantial, and reliable financial support that prioritizes innovation **as the leader and community define it**, in service of driving impact.

**Partner with and support** institutions led by Black, Indigenous, and leaders of color that have long-term, robust, and authentic relationships with Black leaders and communities to kickstart and sustain your expansion of support for Black social innovators.



**MEET A FELLOW:**

**WILLIAM JACKSON**

DURHAM, NC

---

2014 FELLOW

---

**FOUNDER,  
VILLAGE OF WISDOM**

Village of Wisdom supports family organizing and advocacy entities working to eliminate racial injustice in schools. We develop tools and resources that help parents, teachers, and students create ideal learning environments for Black and Brown learners.

---

**WHAT IS THE NEW  
WORLD YOUR  
ORGANIZATION IS  
REIMAGINING?**

We dream of a world that protects Black Genius. At Village of Wisdom, we protect Black Genius by translating the wisdom of Black parents to create culturally affirming learning experiences for Black learners.

“What brings me joy about being a Black innovator is the belief in ourselves — that we have the answers to our liberation. Look at our impact on innovation, inventions, justice and culture— now imagine what we will do when we are free. It feels central to my soul to create pockets of liberation and see the impact on people around me. What a gift to be a part of.”

# CONCLUSION

We live among Black futurists—social innovators who are writing their own stories and radically reimagining tomorrow as we know it. When William Jackson, Founder of Village of Wisdom (VOW), was selected for a BMA Fellowship, he was almost a decade ahead of his time in the philanthropic and social innovation field. As a long-time educator in Durham, North Carolina, he founded VOW in 2013 to leverage the collective wisdom of Black families to create learning environments that affirmed and honored the inherent genius of Black children. When he launched VOW, **he unapologetically centered Black voices because he knew the wisdom was already in the community.**

He chose the name Village of Wisdom because it reflected the idea that the strength and wisdom of Black people come from the village, ***not the ivory tower.***

In Jackson's words, "In the wisdom came the keys to a more liberated future. In the wisdom came a blueprint for protecting Black Genius. In the wisdom came the remembrance that we were all we ever needed to get free. In the wisdom, we will find liberation."

The world is full of Black leaders, like William Jackson, who will continue to lean into that Black wisdom.

The wisdom to believe that liberation is possible.

As Angela Davis said, "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time."

Liberation is not just possible; it is inevitable. So let's act like it.

