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## **Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development: A Theoretical Reflection on Applied Work**

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Darcy A. Ayers entitled "Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development: A Theoretical Reflection on Applied Work." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Sociology.

Jon Shefner, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Michelle Brown, Christina Ergas, Lisa East

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

**Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development:  
A Theoretical Reflection on Applied Work**

A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Darcy A. Ayers  
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Thanks Mom for my lunar brain and Dad for my solar brain. And thank you both for growing and challenging me. I am career ready because of you.

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## ABSTRACT

This capstone is a “theoretically and experientially informed report” of the work I began as an AmeriCorps VISTA member in August 2021 and now do as Program Director for SEEED (Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development), a small Black-led nonprofit working to address racialized generational poverty in the communities of East Knoxville. The report serves as a record and reflection of my experience doing front-line anti-poverty work, primarily directing the flagship Career Readiness Program (CRP). I begin this report with a short recounting of the history of Knoxville’s urban development through a Black geographies lens and continue with a review of the city’s more recent figures on race, poverty, and community violence to give context to the place in which SEEED works and the people it aims to serve.

In Chapter 2 I introduce SEEED and its founding as a response to a very visceral community need, and then dive deeper into how SEEED attempts to operationalize its mission of ‘pathways out of poverty’ for young adults. I describe the Career Readiness Program - an 8-week paid work experience program designed to equip participants (ages 18-24) with the life and job skills that will ensure their success with finding and keeping employment. I go on to explain the organizational logic model SEEED is working to develop through the Community Engagement and Green Construction social enterprises.

Finally, Chapter 3 serves as a space to reflect on the work and the constraints that hinder its progress. In analyzing my experience of “doing” applied sociology, I explore two aspects of my experience working at SEEED and the theoretical frameworks I employed to attempt to understand both. First, I use Friere’s model of revolutionary pedagogy to engage with my work designing the Career Readiness Program as we strive to reach and educate at-risk, disillusioned young adults. Then I reflect on the experience of working as an employee of SEEED. I conclude with commentary on the contradictions I encountered doing anti-oppression work within the corporate non-profit environment, employing Haiven and Khasnabish’s “radical imaginaries” (2014) as a potential framing for transformational organizational and social change moving forward.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE - Knoxville, TN: A Critical History Through the Lens of Race and Urban Development.....	1
Black Geographies of Knoxville.....	1
A Current Data Narrative of East Knoxville.....	6
CHAPTER TWO - SEED: A Grassroots Response to a Community Need.....	8
Career Readiness Program.....	11
Social Enterprise Pathways.....	14
CHAPTER THREE - Analyzing the Model: Discerning Theory in Praxis.....	19
Pathways Out of Poverty.....	20
The Radical Imagination at Work.....	24
CONCLUSION.....	28
REFERENCES.....	30
VITA.....	33

## CHAPTER 1

### Knoxville, TN: A Critical History Through the Lens of Race and Urban Development

Most credit Auguste Comte with the distinction of Sociology as a scientific discipline in the 19th century, taking departure from the more conventional historical and theological interpretations of human affairs. More than a century later, mainstream academic sociology in the tradition of social theorists like Emile Durkheim continued to practice sociology as “the systematic study of the present” with an intrinsic assumption that those systems and processes studied transcend the context of time and place (Tilly 1988). Pushing back against this archetype of social science research in his essay, “Future history,” Charles Tilly argues for the necessity of historicism within the science: “past sociological relations and their residues - material, ideological, and otherwise - constrain present social relations, and consequently their residues as well” (710). The historical record we keep on ourselves is the first dataset social scientists should approach when attempting to understand contemporary social phenomena. It is from this paradigm that I attempt in this first chapter to capture and relate a brief history of Knoxville’s urban development to give context to the current, in many ways alarming, statistics on poverty and racial inequities in Knoxville. This material reality born from generations of social and political forces is what drives SEEED’s mission.

### Black Geographies of Knoxville

Pioneered less than two decades ago by Katherine McKittrick (2006), Black geographies is both an ontological practice, focusing on the spatial knowledge and practices of Black communities throughout the diaspora, and a theoretical tradition asserting that race is not merely socially constructed, but *spatially* as well. To humbly paraphrase El-Amin (2019), Black Knoxville is a culturally-distinct *place* and *people* that has been constructed entirely by social, economic and political forces throughout the city’s history. I lean closely in this section on El-Amin’s dissertation, *Chocolate City Way Up South in Appalachia: Black Knoxville at the Intersection of Race, Place, and Region*, not only for its concise historical account of Black Knoxville, but also its framing of ‘place’ as any space imbued with social and political context (Cressell 2004), its situating of Knoxville as an “Appalachian city” (Wheeler 2005:2), and its theoretical grounding in Black geographies. Sociologists understand race to be a socially-

fabricated tool based on physical and cultural characteristics, forged and wielded by the elite for material and political gain. Through a Black geographies lens, race becomes an identity manifested through land grabs, forced movement, cartographic exclusion, concentration and stigmatization, or even relegating a community to a culturally invisible status. It is a label and an experience that traverses the globe and its human history, often on the heels of colonial, then capitalist expansion. Privatization of land and ownership of a place also means possession of its geographic and cultural knowledge; those who draw the maps tell the story and write the future.

Knoxville's history, of course, has always been Black history. Founded in 1786 by the Euro-American settler James White, Knoxville was an early trade center for the Southwest Territory (originally colonized Cherokee land, eventually admitted to the union as the state of Tennessee in 1796) and grew to become a major commercial hub in the region thanks to post-Civil War industrial growth and the expansion of the railroad system into Southern Appalachia (El-Amin 2019). It is believed that the first inhabitants of the new city were white settlers migrating south from Virginia, no doubt accompanied by enslaved Blacks. In fact, an 1817 city ordinance prohibited "Blacks from living in Knoxville unless they were in service to white inhabitants" (*ibid*:47). Over the next century, many Black individuals and families began migrating to Knoxville post-Emancipation in search of work and the American abstraction of freedom; the Black population grew quickly, from one-fifth of Knoxville's overall population in 1860 to a third in 1880. According to El-Amin,

As the number of Blacks in the city grew, a small Black business and professional class began to develop, and soon Blacks began establishing their own institutions. Post-Civil War Knoxville saw Black churches, fraternal orders, self-improvement societies, newspapers, fire companies, and schools, including what would become Knoxville College" (2019:49-50).

A burgeoning class structure also meant that a few Black elites managed to engage in the political sphere alongside whites. At the time, Knoxville boasted its Black police officers and public officials as the "model for good race relations in the New South" (Wheeler 2005:36).

In the final decades of the 19th century, Knoxville, "not so much a southern city as an Appalachian urban enclave," experienced a modest boom in commerce and population (Wheeler 2005:27). The promise of industrial expansion was also attracting a white labor force migrating from the rural hill communities to the more sophisticated lifestyle that Knoxville could provide: namely electricity, running water, and employment at sites like the Knoxville Iron Company,



Knoxville Car Wheel Company, Burr and Terry's Saw Mill, and various regional railroad companies. One does not have to search long to find stories and folklore that depict the gruff debauchery of Appalachian hillfolk, but historian Bruce Wheeler puts a fine point on it for Knoxville's context:

Few had left behind their Appalachian mores, their suspicion of government and authority at all levels, their rough-and-tumble democratic politics, their belief in the superfluity of education, their fundamentalist religions, or their hatred of those who possessed more than they did. The once-sleepy town turned into an increasingly violent and crime-ridden one... (2005:27).

This period of rapid urbanization brought on seedy saloons, cocaine dens, crime and "residential segregation by economic class that was beginning to divide the city" (*ibid*:29). Black and white working-class neighborhoods formed close to sites of manufacturing and employment while elites escaped to enclaves further west (now the Fort Sanders neighborhood and the University of Tennessee, Knoxville). The ruling class became more socially and fiscally conservative as color and class lines were drawn and "Knoxville was finding it increasingly difficult to compete in the emerging, consolidating national economy" (*ibid*:32). The number of Blacks in Knoxville quadrupled between 1870 and 1920, leaving them to compete with working class whites in a tightening labor market and pushing the city into a tinderbox of racial hostility.

Following a national trend at the turn of the 20th century, the economic, institutional, cultural, and political power that Knoxville's Black middle class was able to leverage during this era of Reconstruction led to a white backlash of sweeping violence and political disenfranchisement through Jim Crow legislation. The "Red Summer" of 1919 refers to a nationwide outbreak of racial violence due to ongoing racial tension and "exacerbated by the discharge of millions of military personnel back to their homes and domestic lives following the end of the war."<sup>1</sup> Knoxville participated in its own Red Summer in August when an anti-Black riot broke out in response to a standard narrative of the time: Maurice Mays, a young Black man, was accused without proof of murdering a white woman (Booker 2001). State guardsmen were called in to quell the mob but ended up joining in the barrage against Knoxville's Black community.

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<sup>1</sup> See National WWI Museum and Memorial "Red Summer: The Race Riots of 1919" <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/red-summer#:~:text=An%20outbreak%20of%20racial%20violence,the%20end%20of%20the%20war.>

The two-day riot left a path of death and destruction, and Knoxville saw an exodus of over 1,500 Blacks in the period that followed. Again quoting El-Amin,

...race relations in Knoxville became increasingly more rigid, creating a post-emancipation racial caste system and reaffirming the whiteness of Knoxville. Under Jim Crow, Blacks in Knoxville were allowed to progress within the confines of their own communities so long as it did not interfere with the white power structure and the city's public image (2019:52).

Meanwhile, Knoxville was seeing an influx of poor and working-class whites from all over the country and two short years later, a city chapter of the Klu Klux Klan was established in 1921 (Wheeler 2005). The deepening of racial boundaries coupled with white flight to the suburbs left the city squeezed by its fleeing tax base and compounded its already complex social issues. Despite a national trend of economic development, manufacturing jobs became increasingly scarce in Knoxville as companies left for cheaper markets across the industrializing states (*ibid*). Black workers were further barred from economic opportunity due to employment discrimination and relegation to low-paying domestic service or menial jobs. The first half of the twentieth century brought very material pressures to the Black community in Knoxville: income inequality, housing woes, and the diminishing availability of quality employment.

What came next was “a critical juncture that set into motion traumatizing structural and social changes - cycles of displacement, dispossession, and disinvestment - that reverberate over generations in a collective sense of Black placelessness within Knoxville generally” (El-Amin 2019:15). Between 1959-1974, the City of Knoxville enacted three urban renewal projects in East Knoxville to make way for a downtown overhaul: the Willow Street Project, the Mountain View Project, and the Morningside Project.<sup>2</sup> Those 15 years saw over 2,500 families displaced from their homes, 70% of whom were Black.<sup>3</sup> Schools, churches, and 107 Black-owned businesses were erased from the map. El-Amin writes of the devastating effects of this spatial violence:

... these projects transformed hundreds of acres of Black neighborhoods and the nerve center of Black commerce into concrete highways, apartment buildings, and

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<sup>2</sup> See a photo archive of the Mountain View and Morningside Urban Renewal Projects: <https://www.knoxnews.com/picture-gallery/news/2022/06/15/knoxville-urban-removal-project-morningside-neighborhood-pictures/4773362001/>

<sup>3</sup> This data comes from the Beck Cultural Exchange Center website: <https://www.beckcenter.net/urban-renewal>. The Beck was founded in 1975 to capture and preserve Knoxville's Black history and culture in the wake of urban renewal. See also <https://www.wuot.org/news/2021-05-13/losing-home-when-urban-renewal-came-to-knoxville>

public facilities, including the Civic Coliseum. . . . Losing their homes meant that they could not pass on property to future generations to assist with upward mobility. In addition, as jobs followed whites to the suburbs, limited access to employment made it such that Blacks remained dependent on the state, which reverberated in a cycle of Black powerlessness (2019:62-3).

With segregation recently ruled illegal, Knoxville's "power elite" (Mills 1956) needed a new means of reclaiming place and power. Even on the backdrop of national Civil Rights campaigns and advancements, a 1967 survey of the Black community found economic and employment concerns still at the top of the list. At the time, Black Knoxvillians were making about 50 percent the income of their white counterparts (Brooks and Banner 1976). Public housing became even more crowded, concentrated spaces of poverty as new projects were built north and east of downtown to house the thousands displaced by urban renewal.

Through this time of upheaval, Knoxville's Black community was not just physically moved further from city center by the relocation of housing, but in effect set back generations-worth of economic progress and excluded Black Knoxvillians from the city's community-building and cultural place-making process altogether. Black cultural centers such as the Gem Theater, a thriving Black cinema and concert venue at the heart of what is current-day Old City, was shut down in 1964. Many have noted the need to characterize urban renewal projects as a form of urban *removal* to highlight the more permanent social and cultural consequences of geographic exclusion. "Once developers have laid down a certain urban structure, that structure defines the opportunities for further development" (Tilly 1988:710). Having removed the obstacle, city leaders worked over the final decades of the twentieth century to capitalize on its newly acquired land and promising economic growth by pouring revitalizing dollars into the downtown core. The defining feature of Knoxville's development in the 1970s was the James White Parkway: a highway system connecting South Knoxville to Interstate 40 built on the expropriated land of Black communities and dividing East Knoxville from the city's civic and business district. Riding the national wave of neoliberalism, Knoxville poured public money, to the tune of eighty million dollars, into developing the site of the 1982 World's Fair primarily to the benefit of white private enterprise (Wheeler 2005).

It is important to resist the urge to speak of urban renewal as a thing of the past. Development in East Knoxville has shown no sign of slowing as the city moves forward with downtown revitalization campaigns that continue to "remake" Knoxville. The goal remains to

attract professional and tourism enterprises, marketed towards a particular culture and image to which many of El-Amin's Black Knoxville research respondents struggled to relate.<sup>4</sup> Marxist geographer David Harvey (1993) contends that the idea of 'place' is not naturally occurring; rather, it is constructed through systems of power, materiality, and symbolism. Robert Hay (1998) goes further to suggest that over time, place becomes something we connect and relate to, serving as the anchor to so much of our identity. However, without a true home to go back to, without the opportunity to spread roots and be nourished by a community, it is difficult to build connection with a place or a people - a theme El-Amin refers to as "the racialized experiences of displacement" in her own dissertation research just a few years ago. She identifies feelings of exclusion and loss of place in her participants not only due to physical spatial violence and the limited economic opportunities, but also because of the stripping away of a community and culture that had once been thriving.

### **A Current Data Narrative of East Knoxville**

East Knoxville is a geographically-defined area with the borders of Interstate 40 to the north, downtown to the west, the Tennessee River to the southwest, and the city line to the east and southeast. It is also a culturally-defined area of three distinct majority-Black neighborhoods, which El-Amin refers to as the "East Knoxville-Mechanicsville-Lonsdale triad" (2019:8). To its residents, it is colloquially referred to as "the East side." Following neoliberal urban trends of the late-20th century, the city of Knoxville used the levers of state-sanctioned geographic control to appropriate land and private property, concentrate poverty and those who experienced it, and push it further away. Today, Knoxville's landscape remains hyper-segregated by race and income, which has had lasting implications on the development of Knoxville's economy, people, and culture.

In 2020, Knoxville's overall poverty rate was 22.5%, already double compared to the national rate of 11.4%. However, when viewing the data by race, Knoxville's Black poverty rate is 32.4%, three times the percentage of white poverty at 10.9% (Dennis 2022). Contrast that with

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<sup>4</sup> The most recent city-funded project is the building of a minor league baseball stadium on the site of former Black neighborhoods. That project is already projected to cost more than the original \$80 million quote, and has yet to meet its own goal of employing women- and minority-owned contractors. <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/money/business/2023/03/09/smokies-stadium-in-downtown-knoxville-seeks-more-minority-contractors/69981477007/>

city demographics, Black Knoxvilleians make up only 16% of the population compared to 70% whites.<sup>5</sup> Nearly half of Knoxville's Black residents live below the poverty line. Astonishingly, the 2020 median income for Black Knoxvilleians was \$30,427, compared to \$63,623 for white households, and Black unemployment was 7.3% compared to 3.9% for whites (Dennis 2022). This present-day data tells a narrative of poverty that has further implications for continued displacement and violence in Knoxville's inner-city neighborhoods. In terms of housing, an estimated 65% of the Black population in Knoxville lives in renter-occupied housing.<sup>6</sup> In 2021, the average annual demand for rental housing exceeded average supply by more than 50%. The market-rate rental occupancy rate grew to 98.9% by the end of 2021. Overall, Knox County currently has a cumulative deficit of 17,000 housing units, and cost of rent was projected to raise by 5% - 10% in 2022.<sup>7</sup>

The pressures of finding safe, stable, affordable housing in Knoxville are coupled with the consistent presence of violence in its inner-city neighborhoods. In 2020, 37 people died by homicide in the city, and that figure grew by more than 10% in 2021 to 41 deaths. Seventy-five percent of gun homicide victims in 2021 in Knoxville were Black. Of those people killed, 22.5% were between the ages of 15-19 (Dennis 2022). In a matter of months in 2021, nine teenagers died by gunfire, including six teenagers who attended the same high school and one by the hands of police. In her dissertation research, El-Amin's respondents conceptualized Black safety not as the current state of policing, criminalization, and incarceration, but as freedom from a life of fear of these things - freedom to live, pursue dignity, and be validated outside of the white gaze and state control. Throughout its history, East Knoxville has and continues to be many things - a place, a people, a culture, and a geographic area that has been constructed through city policies resulting in increased wealth inequality and hypersegregation. It is exactly this cycle of poverty, displacement, youth disconnection, and violence that SEEED strives to disrupt.

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<sup>5</sup> This data comes from the US Decennial Census P1 report <https://data.census.gov/table?t=Populations+and+People&g=160XX00US4740000&tid=DECENNIALPL2020.P1>

<sup>6</sup> This data comes from the 2021 American Community Survey 5-year estimates B25003B TENURE (Black or African American Alone Householder).

<sup>7</sup> This data comes from the Knoxville Area Association of Realtors 2022 State of Housing Report.

## CHAPTER 2

### SEED: A Grassroots Response to A Community Need

SEED (Socially Equal Energy Efficient Development)<sup>8</sup> is currently located in the Morningside Community of East Knoxville – the city’s third and final neighborhood to undergo urban renewal in the early 1970s – and operates out of the Morningside Community Center. The community center has served many functions over the years, including as field office for the Knoxville Housing Authority (which eventually became the Knoxville Community Development Corporation [KCDC] in 1973) for the Morningside Turnkey III project of pre-packaged home building during the later years of urban removal and redevelopment to the east.<sup>9</sup> It is still known as “the old Turnkey building” to some elderly residents who remember that era. The Morningside Community Center had been closed and vacant for over 10 years before SEED raised enough money to renovate the building and move in. Today, most Morningside residents are renters and live well below the poverty line, with the median income at around \$13,000 a year. The neighborhood also currently ranks 99% higher than the national average in risk of burglary, robbery, and assault.<sup>10</sup> SEED serves the 19 Knox County census tracts designated as economically distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission where, even prior to the impacts of COVID-19, unemployment rates were up to 3.5 times greater than the county’s overall rate, and the area is a federally-designated food desert.<sup>11</sup>

Founded in March 2009 by Stan Johnson, Jerome Johnson, Joshua Outsey, and Jarius Bush, SEED was formed as a response to the deep social ills these men saw in their East Knoxville community. Prior to that, all four co-founders were involved in Tribe One, an urban outreach ministry founded in 1991 by the late Danny Mayfield and Chris Woodhull to reach young Black men caught up in cycles of poverty and gang violence.<sup>12</sup> The organization provided various programming over its 20-year tenure, including weekly support group meetings,

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<sup>8</sup> SEED, Inc. is the official name of the 501c3, but the non-profit brands as just the acronym.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.knoxnews.com/picture-gallery/news/2022/06/15/knoxville-urban-removal-project-morningside-neighborhood-pictures/4773362001/> and <https://www.kcdc.org/about/history/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.addressreport.com/report/neighborhood/knoxville-tn/morningside-knoxville-tn/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/money/business/2021/05/06/stan-johnson-making-difference-his-community-through-seeed/7281957002/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.knoxnews.com/in-depth/news/2021/04/02/danny-mayfield-forever-changed-knoxville-politics/6810855002/>

recording studio educational bootcamps, and eventually a screen-printing business with local clients.<sup>13</sup> For co-founder Josh Outsey, a young transplant from Berea, KY, Tribe One offered a place where he “finally started to feel connected to Knoxville, a sense of community.”<sup>14</sup> Outsey also credits Tribe One for the opportunity to learn about himself and build a sense of ownership over his narrative: “There was a time when I played the role of the ‘at-risk youth’ a little bit. It was all I had been shown.” After 20 years and Mayfield’s untimely death from cancer, Tribe One shut its doors, but not before the four men had gained valuable insights into running a social enterprise, building community networks, and creating models for social change.

SEED’s first physical address was Stan Johnson’s home in the East Knoxville neighborhood of Parkridge, where the four co-founders came together in the backyard with the goal to disrupt the cycles of violence fueled by the lack of economic opportunity in their East Knoxville neighborhoods. Johnson served as a mentor for the younger men, bringing both his personal experience as a Jamaican immigrant who lived a version of the American Dream and his business acumen as a former owner and operator of a used car dealership.<sup>15</sup> The social problems Johnson was motivated to solve were clear: he saw high unemployment in young Black adults which he connected to the high instances of drug use and crime for that demographic; a lack of housing standards enforced during the period of rapid home construction in the early 1970s resulting in low efficiency homes and high energy bills; and a general lack of educational or professional growth opportunities for young people in his community outside of the traditional college track.<sup>16</sup> Outsey, however, credits his motivation to a much more personal need: “Jerome [Johnson] and I understood ourselves to be intellectuals, in our 20s, with some guilt for not going to college. We wanted to be productive, but we knew we needed programs and opportunities to get us there.” These were also the years following the 2008 recession, when young adults entering secondary education or the workforce were having to compete with an influx of newly unemployed workers, many of whom were older with more experience. Outsey knew what kind

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.knoxnews.com/picture-gallery/news/2021/04/01/tribe-one-knoxville-program-young-people-inner-city/6996204002/>

<sup>14</sup> All quotes and paraphrased responses from Joshua Outsey are from an interview the author conducted with him on December 29, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Hear Stan tell his own story over two parts of Hallerin Hilton Hill’s local TV show, *Anything is Possible*: <https://www.wvlt.tv/video/2022/07/22/anything-is-possible-stan-johnson-pt-2/>

<sup>16</sup> All quotes and paraphrased responses from Stan Johnson are from an interview the author conducted with him on December 28, 2022.

of support he needed in order to succeed, and when he didn't find it in his own community, he was determined to create it for himself.

SEED started small, according to Johnson, with community clean-up projects funded by “a hodgepodge collection of churches, foundations, and individuals.” After some community organizing training from the Highlander Education and Research Center and the Midwest Academy, the founders began conducting a series of Listening Projects where young door-to-door canvassers were paid to collect needs assessment survey responses to better understand the challenges their community members were facing. The initial results were clear: lack of opportunities for youth, resulting in an increased presence of drugs and gun violence, and unaffordable utility and housing burdens. In 2009, empowered by the voices of East Knoxville, the election of the country's first Black president, and the new administration's promise of a green technology future, the founders formalized SEED's organizational mission to create ‘pathways out of poverty’ for disadvantaged young adults in Knoxville's inner-city through increased environmental literacy and career development. For co-founder Outsey, who describes himself as a “young Black man that just wanted [his] community to value and appreciate [him],” SEED's greatest impact is in “teaching people their value in every sense of the word.”

The educational, environmental, and workforce development programming has transformed much over the years, so it is important to note that this abbreviated introduction to SEED is an incomplete history and serves primarily to give context to the work described in this chapter. Today, SEED primarily works to operationalize its mission through its flagship programming, the Career Readiness Program (CRP). The CRP is an 8-week paid personal and professional development experience for young adults (ages 18-24) who have aged out of traditional youth services but continue to experience the consequences of poverty and community violence and face barriers to success. The goal of the CRP is to connect the young adult participants to the skills and resources they need to thrive, motivate them to recognize their own worth and potential, and to prepare them to take their next step, whatever that may be. The rest of this chapter will elaborate more on the programmatic and theoretical logic model of the Career Readiness Program and introduce the two social enterprise pathways and corresponding pre-apprenticeship bootcamps.



## Career Readiness Program

In 2010, a cohort of 7 participants graduated from SEEED's first Career Readiness Program, directed by Stan Johnson with help from AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer Alana Hibbler. Having evolved through many iterations over the years, the program now is designed to facilitate a participant's emotional, intellectual, and personal development so that they may pursue a fulfilling, purposeful, and stable career. This in turn develops their capacity to provide for themselves, their families, and their communities. The focus is on self-awareness and skill-building to enable and inspire participants to take active steps toward the future of their choice. The principles of the CRP curriculum stem from core Social Work frameworks: Andragogy, or adult experiential learning theory,<sup>17</sup> Critical Race Theory,<sup>18</sup> and Trauma-Informed Care.<sup>19</sup> The program, currently funded through the United Way of Greater Knoxville's Community Agency Grant, runs three days a week on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for five hours daily. For most of its history, the primary goal and metric of success for the CRP has been participant employment post-graduation, with an average success rate of 70% employed, matriculating into a bootcamp, or continuing their education. As an AmeriCorps VISTA, I wrote a more detailed strategic framework (also known as a logic model) with program objectives, outputs, outcomes, and desired impacts. In the future, something like the William T. Grant Foundation's Institutional Challenge Grant would be especially useful in studying and assessing SEEED's long-term impact.<sup>20</sup>

As current Program Director, I run two 8-week Career Readiness Programs a year, spring and fall cohorts. Recruitment takes place through flier drops, social media, tabling at community events, and networking through community partners. However, the most effective recruitment method has always been through word of mouth within peer and family networks across East Knoxville communities. A Program Coordinator supports me in curriculum development and acts as direct supervisor and facilitator of day-to-day programming. The Programs team is also

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.neit.edu/blog/what-is-adult-learning-theory>

<sup>18</sup> <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1034&context=sferc>

<sup>19</sup> <https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/social-research/institutes-centers/institute-on-trauma-and-trauma-informed-care/what-is-trauma-informed-care.html>

<sup>20</sup> The 3-year \$650,000 grant "encourages university-based research institutes, schools, and centers to build sustained research-practice partnerships with public agencies or nonprofit organizations in order to reduce inequality in youth outcomes." <https://wtgrantfoundation.org/grants/institutional-challenge-grant#overview>

supported by a graduate intern from University of Tennessee's College of Social Work, who primarily provides participant case management and emotional support, but who may also assist in program activities, administrative duties and more. The curriculum, which has evolved under each director before me, attempts to answer the questions: "What does it mean to be 'career ready' in these times, and how can it be taught in 8 weeks?" Since the program's inception, that formula has been to focus on teaching life skills, job skills, and placement skills. Through those three components, detailed below, program staff work to determine where each participant is in their personal and professional journey, and how we can help propel them in a positive direction over the course of two months.

Throughout the application and interview process, participants are assessed first and foremost on their ability to fully attend, engage with, and complete the program, and their commitment to their future. Do they seem confident with the idea of success they are shooting for; is that vision realistic given their circumstances; and are they enthusiastic about taking steps to get there? Outside of age (18-24), the program itself has very little in terms of eligibility requirements, which means SEEED serves a wide diversity of participants: I've mentored housing-insecure participants without high school degrees, participants who already owned their own small business, and many others somewhere in between. While SEEED was originally formed by and for young Black men, many CRP participants have been poor white folks as well. Stan has often made the comment that "the hood and the holler" are fighting the same battles, a clear recognition of the multiracial class struggle in our Appalachian East Knoxville community. Our most recent cohort reflects an even greater diversity in race, gender, and sexual orientation, which serves as a critical opportunity for young people from across demographics experiencing intersectional oppressions to meet and form solidarity with each other.

During onboarding and orientation, participants are introduced to SEEED, its mission, staff, and programs. I lead a short discussion on what 'poverty' and 'wealth' means to participants, what pathways they envision for themselves in the future, and walk them through SEEED's four values: community, sustainability, equity, and personal development. In the first week, the participants complete both a self-care inventory and an aptitude assessment so that they learn more about themselves and we as program staff get a sense of their baseline needs,

goals, and talents.<sup>21</sup> We also introduce an Individual Development Plan, which is a guided worksheet meant to identify key goals in 4 areas: professional career, education and skill-building, resources and networks, and personal development. The participants are then prompted to map out short-, mid-, and long-term action plans for each area. The objective here is to develop the capacity to visualize the steps required to reach a life and career that meets their needs, that they can grow in, and that they truly love. At the end of each week, my social work intern and I hold a private check-in with each participant to assess progress on goals and identify any needs or barriers that are getting in the way.

The second week of the CRP curriculum covers the life skills needed to be a healthy, engaged, adaptive person in society. In essence, one cannot truly succeed – develop both personally and professionally – until they are able to fundamentally care for themselves and meet their own basic needs. We cover topics such as healthy eating on a budget, physical health and wellness, sexual and reproductive health, harm reduction, mental health, and healthy relationships. These short seminars are taught by volunteer instructors, often from local organizations or agencies specializing in that form of care.<sup>22</sup> The impact is two-fold: participants learn from the local subject experts themselves and are instantly connected with real people from the agencies and resources that are there to support them. We tour the Beck Cultural Exchange Center to connect with the East Knoxville community, learn about the not-so-distant history of urban renewal, and to reflect on how a city’s past has real impact on the young peoples’ present and future. More advanced life skills include modules on financial literacy (learning about credit, banking, and budgeting from banking professionals), civic literacy (learning about local government and civic engagement from members of City Council Movement), an introduction into the legal and court system from representative of the Knoxville Bar Association, and even how to navigate the KAT public transit system. At the halfway point, we hold an Ally Party wherein professionals and instructors in SEEED’s community are invited to a casual networking event so that participants can practice their personal interaction skills and elevator pitch with adults who actively want to see them succeed.

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<sup>21</sup> During my year as a VISTA member, I wrote a small grant through AmeriCorps to fund the YouScience aptitude assessment for all participants.

<sup>22</sup> Examples include the Knox County Health Department, A Step Ahead, Metro Drug Coalition, Mental Health Association of East Tennessee, and McNabb Center

In the second half of the program, we move to job skills, beginning with soft skills such as communication, professionalism, teamwork and collaboration, and critical thinking and problem solving. After some market research, we chose to license the WIN Learning Essential Softskills online courseware, founded in 1996 by a former college professor to “ensure all learners and job seekers have the foundational academic and employability skills to be career and life ready.”<sup>23</sup> For the most recent cohort, my program coordinator also used the supplemental material provided by WIN Learning to facilitate group discussion on the topics. The Programs Chair of SEED’s board, an environmental project manager by trade, comes to teach a lesson on using math in the real world. The program expands outside the classroom on various site visits to connect the participant to career resources and educational opportunities; CRP cohorts have visited the Tennessee College for Applied Technology, The Bottom, Knoxville Entrepreneur Center, the Knoxville Chamber of Commerce, UTK’s Office of Sustainability, and Battlefield Farm.

Placement skills include workshops on resume and cover letter writing, interview practice at the Knoxville-Knox County CAC, and visits to job fairs at the American Jobs Center. If a participant is motivated to shadow a particular job to learn more about it, I work to find an employer in my or SEED’s network who would be willing to provide such an opportunity. At the end of the 8 weeks, graduation is held at Zoo Knoxville where participants’ families, volunteer instructors, and others in SEED’s network are invited to commemorate this accomplishment and celebrate with the young program graduates. In my experience, about half of graduates matriculate into one of SEED’s social enterprise bootcamps, with the other half continuing their career path through another means of education or employment. Moving forward, I hope SEED will continue building relationships with community organizations and businesses that may be interested in providing access to well-paying entry-level job opportunities for CRP graduates.

### **Social Enterprise Pathways**

Beyond the Career Readiness Program, my work has shifted to also build curriculum for and direct the pre-apprenticeship educational programming that feeds into SEED’s social

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<sup>23</sup> <https://www.winlearning.com/aboutwin>

enterprise career pathways. After graduating, participants can continue to gain professional development experience through one of SEEED’s social enterprise pre-apprenticeship tracks: Community Engagement (various social science research, community environmental education, and social service liaison work funded mainly by research grants and government contracts) and Green Construction (solar home building to promote affordable home ownership for low-income families currently funded mostly through foundations and charitable giving).

In 2013, SEEED served as a stakeholder organization in the IBM Smarter Cities Challenge awarded to the city of Knoxville. The challenge Mayor Madeline Rogero and her administration wanted to address was clear: “Knoxville has an aging housing infrastructure that consumes energy in excess, often leaving residents with utility bills too large for them to pay and resulting in a drawdown of resources from supporting agencies. The cycle wastes millions of dollars annually and will continue to do so unless corrected.”<sup>24</sup> Energy prices are far higher now than when these homes were built, therefore energy efficiency was not a fiscally prudent concern for KCDC while they were pursuing redevelopment to the east. A team of experts from IBM made recommendations on ways Knoxville could systematically improve housing and energy systems and “provided a 12-month roadmap for immediate action coupled with a governance structure to kick-start energy efficiency measures.”

One product of that effort was the Knoxville Extreme Energy Makeover (KEEM), funded by TVA in 2015, which weatherized over 1,200 low income homes and spurred the revitalization of the derelict Morningside Community Center. In the years to follow, SEEED developed curriculum for two programs - GreenCAP (Green Community Awareness Program) and EnergyCorps (construction/weatherization pre-apprenticeship training) - that would eventually become Community Engagement and Green Construction, respectively.<sup>25</sup> In 2019, SEEED conducted another round of community listening surveys and input forums ahead of the mayoral race. Attended by more than 350 inner-city residents, these efforts produced an action plan approved by both candidates, with implementation begun by Mayor Kincannon’s administration. In 2021, SEEED partnered with the City of Knoxville and Knox County to help distribute

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<sup>24</sup> See the final report here: [https://cdnsm5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server\\_109478/File/Sustainability/SmarterCities/finalreport.pdf](https://cdnsm5-hosted.civiclive.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_109478/File/Sustainability/SmarterCities/finalreport.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> It was during this period that my advisor Jon Shefner began working with SEEED. Shefner, spurred by a Brookings Institution report revealing Knoxville was the largest per capita and second fastest growing green economy (Brookings 2010) began working with SEEED as he tried to build a green economy coalition in Knoxville.

COVID-19 relief funds in the form of rental and utility assistance to low-income tenants. Most recently, SEED has entered a contract with Knoxville Utility Board to conduct monthly community education workshops on energy efficiency and home weatherization.

The purpose of the Community Engagement (CE) department is both to connect people living in poverty with the resources and services that exist for them, as well as to collect critical data and community voices through participatory research. Through this department, SEED acts as a liaison to deliver information regarding local resources to folks who need them most, as well as communicating community needs to government and non-government agencies working to solve complex social problems. Today, most of SEED's community engagement work is in partnership with Three<sup>3</sup>, a local research nonprofit with a mission "to foster equitable and sustainable futures . . . [and] to advance transformative social outcomes for historically underserved individuals and populations."<sup>26</sup> They provide the essential training, resources, and guidance in pursuing grants, competing for contracts, conducting qualitative research and data collection, and collaborating with research partners (like the University of Tennessee and Oak Ridge National Laboratory). Over the past two years, Three<sup>3</sup> and SEED have partnered on a number of participatory research and community education and outreach projects regarding energy use, health, and home safety funded by Sociological Initiatives Foundation, Southeast Sustainability Directors Network, Tennessee Valley Authority, Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the Department of Energy.

The Community Engagement Bootcamp offers training in community outreach and communication skills, social science research, and digital literacy, and feeds into an opportunity to continue working with SEED's Community Engagement Department. For most of the Community Engagement Specialists at SEED, this is their first experience being a part of any scientific research, much less social science research on their own communities. The bootcamp starts from the beginning, introducing the scientific method as a means of making observations about our social world, developing curiosity about why things are the way they are, asking questions that challenge the status quo, and cultivating the tools needed to answer them. The CE Specialists are trained to conduct and analyze surveys, interviews, focus groups, and community conversations for various environmental and energy projects. Our partners at Three<sup>3</sup> work with

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.threecubed.org>

our CE team to cultivate strong research ethics and best practices and build an “equity and environmental justice framework” within which they operate.

The Community Engagement team approaches all of its work with a customer/client service mentality, working to be an accessible and approachable resource for a community that often has had to settle for much less. Those who have had to depend on social assistance have experienced this country’s bureaucratic headache that is mired in procedural injustice. Attending the bootcamp and apprenticing in the Community Engagement department teaches the young adults the skills necessary to uplift their communities and gives them real experience working for a non-profit in both social science research and community- or client-relations. The work is meaningful both for the mutual aid aspect of a community being served by the people who look like them – not to mention the positive impact it assuredly has on collecting a more representative dataset – but I also see the CE specialists themselves developing their own critical thinking and class consciousness as they participate in the complex process of understanding poverty and attempting to use the resources around them to alleviate it.

The second option for a CRP graduate is to matriculate into SEEED’s new Green Construction (GC) Bootcamp. SEEED has licensed the Home Builders Institute pre-apprenticeship curriculum to be piloted in the spring 2023 bootcamp.<sup>27</sup> The bootcamp will teach core technical skills in environmentally friendly construction, tool use, construction safety, and trade math and measurement to jumpstart a career in the construction industry. This curriculum emphasizes residential construction-focused skills, green technologies, and the fundamental knowledge needed for employment in an entry-level job in the building industry. Apprentices in the GC Bootcamp will gain hands-on experience at a solar home construction site. In 2022, SEEED completed its first energy-efficient solar home build in Lonsdale, which is set to be sold to a low-income family for below market value so that they may participate in intergenerational wealth-building through home ownership. HomeSource East Tennessee provides educational support to the homebuyers through training in budgeting, credit restoration, and financial literacy skills, and Pinnacle Bank offers the low-income mortgage loans. The home will produce next-to-nothing energy bills due to “the power generated by the solar panels and stored on the batteries,

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<sup>27</sup> <https://hbi.org/curriculum/>

coupled with the ultra-energy efficient design that includes insulation in the attic and walls, plus a high efficiency heat pump to heat and cool the home.”<sup>28 29</sup>

SEED’s newest social enterprise is an attempt at a practical solution to housing insecurity and high energy burdens that will benefit the new homeowners and their family for years to come. This project is in its infancy, but the vision is to foster vital affordable housing development in East Knoxville’s neighborhoods with sustainable homes and infrastructure. Moving forward, there seems to be new Community Engagement and Green Construction funding opportunities every month as the US begins to realize the imminence of a global energy transition and federal funds become more available. SEED’s question moving forward will be whether it has the organizational capacity to access those resources to bring a green energy future to East Knoxville before they are captured and directed elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> SEED has been attempting the work of community development through investing in our young adults and pursuing energy democracy for over a decade. The organization has been a pioneer for Black economic growth in Knoxville, but as I will outline in the next chapter, there remain structural challenges – both internal and external – that continue to impede on its full potential.

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<sup>28</sup> <https://cleanenergy.org/blog/local-knoxville-nonprofit-hosts-open-house-for-low-income-solar-home/>

<sup>29</sup> SEED collaborates with Horton Built Environmental Consulting to draft specialized blueprints that emphasize energy efficient practices. Energy Home Basics will provide technical support that is founded in the US Green Building Council green-built technologies, to utilize the most energy-efficient and sound building practices possible. Appalachian Renewable Resources provides technical support with everything from the solar home’s design to installation and implementation.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/wealth-matters-black-white-wealth-gap-pandemic/>



## CHAPTER 3

### Analyzing the Model: Discerning Theory in Praxis

I had been confident since entering the Sociology department in the fall of 2018 that I did not want to stay in academia. I was much more interested in gaining the theory and skill to become a sharper tool for social change, not to stay, produce, publish. I wanted to further develop my intellectual (and moral) compass so that I could work to produce better results *out there*. Before there was an applied option, I was drawn to the Political Economy concentration: I often found myself questioning systems of power and wanting to understand ‘who gets what and why?’ I see things through the lens of work, inputs and outputs, a transfer of energy, and I have a healthy skepticism of our collective notions of freedom and value. In fall 2017 I was working as a barista, considering whether graduate school was the right next step for me. It was a very political time for me, and I knew the neoliberal university has an incentive to depoliticize its students and faculty. I came across an essay that introduced me to the “Gramscian concept of ‘organic intellectual’” and reminded me that there need not be much difference between studying and living my politics (Saeed 2016).

It was a couple of years before I would read Gramsci in class, but it planted a seed that was germinated throughout my studies when I found Michael Burawoy’s “For Public Sociology” (2004), Prasad’s “Problem Solving Sociology” (2018), and arguably America’s first scholar activist, W.E.B. Du Bois.<sup>31</sup> In my Field Methods course, I was exposed to Shefner and Gellert’s 2009 piece on structural fieldwork, “a qualitative field methodology in which the researcher is self-consciously guided by considerations emerging out of macro- sociological theories” (193). Again, I am not an academic and therefore not here to pontificate further on these frameworks, only to say that all of this and more began to paint a picture of how one might attempt to merge theory with praxis and personal values with professional work.

In no way a monolith, applied sociology to me was a skill I had to learn and practice. The theories I studied in my reading and coursework have become the tools to guide me in understanding my experience. At SEEED, I began to see systems of power domination and how they dictate micro-level struggles for individual agency. I learned that poverty is an exhausting,

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<sup>31</sup> Du Bois practiced a sociology that Burawoy defines as both “publicly engaged and historically embedded” (2021:16).

spirit-crushing experience and a self-perpetuating downward spiral. As sociologists, we know this. My sociological imagination is active every day as I see the steady onslaught of structural disadvantage play out in real time in these young people's lives.<sup>32</sup> I also learned that I must be critical and intersectional but also empathetic in my work. While I have borne witness to poverty in its countless forms throughout my time at SEED, I have chosen to provide very little detail on my participants or coworkers, as my role in this process has never been to tell their stories; I am only a researcher of my own experience.

After setting the historical and statistical context of East Knoxville, and explaining SEED's basic programmatic model working to resist those structures, this third chapter will serve as a reflection of the work, my experience doing it, and the theoretical frameworks I use to understand those experiences. As I set out to write this 'non-traditional' thesis, I tried not to restrict myself, but instead open myself up to creative and innovative ways one could go about writing an "experientially- and theoretically-informed report." In the end, though, I found myself gravitating back to answer the fundamental thesis question: does the model work? To put it in simpler terms: my experience is my data and my reflection is my analysis. In this chapter I will focus first on the Career Readiness Program as a model for individual growth and community building, and then reflect on SEED's model of anti-poverty work in East Knoxville.

## **Pathways Out of Poverty**

In its early years, SEED was serving a generation who could not find or keep jobs. Now, jobs are abundant but good jobs are scarce, and many young adults lack the skills and training to access them. While the Career Readiness Program's original mission was focused on helping young people off streets and into employability, most of my participants now have plenty of experience in the low-wage job market, many working one or more part-time jobs while attending the program. These young people have fallen through the cracks, or rather, massive chasms of our K-12 education system and are already exhausted by the demands of contemporary capitalism. Couple that with the technological black hole that is constantly

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<sup>32</sup> The sociological imagination is a tenet of C. Wright Mills and lies at the heart of the discipline. The Introduction to Sociology textbook I taught from at UTK defines the sociological imagination as "the capacity to think systematically about how things we experience as *personal issues* are really *social issues* that are widely shared by others living in a similar time and place as us" (Manza 2018; *emphasis added*).

demanding their attention, aggressive family disruption that drugs and the incarceration system have levied, and the steady onslaught of violence in their communities, and it becomes clear that these kids are not alright. Having come of age during a global pandemic while watching fascism tread the halls of their national government, it's no wonder these young people come to SEED angry, beaten down, sometimes apocalyptic in their assessment of the world.<sup>33</sup>

Designing the curriculum, I think about the role of education: to grow, develop, and care for our youth so that they may become healthy, productive members of society. I turn to Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and the rejection of the “banking” model of education which treats a student as an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. Instead, we must treat the learner as a co-creator of knowledge and remember that we cannot expect someone to fulfill their ultimate potential while they are oppressed. Instead, the concept of “problem-posing education” emphasizes a mutual learning process through trust and dialogue, encourages a development of critical consciousness, and actively affirms the learner’s humanity.<sup>34</sup> Without the opportunities to think and learn and play, a child will never develop creative intellect and thus never learn to feed their curiosities. The young people I work with suffer from a poverty of imagination, of knowing what could be possible beyond the iniquities they have encountered in their first twenty years. Co-founder Stan Johnson spoke to this in an interview with CAC AmeriCorps VISTA Leader, Cele Weakfall, as he described the sights and sounds of living in the projects of East Knoxville:

I used to take AmeriCorps members for a walk and asked them to tell me what they saw. So, they come back and they’ll say, ‘Well, I seen boarded-up buildings, I seen drug needles on the ground, I seen litter on the ground, I seen homeless people, I seen what appeared to be a prostitute, I see a body was outlined on the ground so I’m going to assume that was a murder that happened there.’ So, imagine that kid that’s going to school and that’s what he’s seeing on his or her way to and from school, right? So you’re putting me in a situation where I don’t know if my mom cooked today, so I don’t know if I got food at the house. I could keep going on and on. My point being, what you physically see is what you can think that you can become, right? It’s kind of hard for the people in poverty to see past what they’re physically seeing today.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> NPR seems to agree: <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/01/1160478454/the-kids-arent-alright-the-post-pandemic-teen-mental-health-crisis>

<sup>34</sup> We already see these models implemented across the country, albeit mostly in higher-income neighborhoods; see <https://www.actonacademy.org/>

<sup>35</sup> Published in the Winter 2022 edition of the CAC AmeriCorps zine *In-Direct Service*: Issue 3, “Poverty Alleviation”

For many participants, attempting a program of this kind requires a fundamentally challenging mindset shift, and the personal transformation piece should not be understated. The Career Readiness Program practices the theory that healing must come before transformation, and one person can have a cascading impact on their community. This is another reason why the cohort aspect of the program is so crucial; the young adults lean on, learn from, and grow with each other. Each participant comes with their own set of experiences, barriers, and aspirations, and many are isolated from even their own families or traditional support structures. Each needs help in different ways; the work is social work at its core. SEED has submitted a grant proposal with the hope of gaining funding for mental health professionals to support participants as they enter into what is hopefully a transformative, but no doubt extremely difficult, 8 weeks and beyond.

The ultimate impact of the program is to attempt to holistically address the many insidious forms of racialized poverty that a person can experience – emotional, educational, medical, housing, relationship, transportation, etc. But in the end, the root of so much pain I’ve witnessed is from just plain poverty. In Introduction to Sociology, I taught a chapter of Jonathan Kozol’s *The Shame of the Nation* (2005) where we learned about the striking advantages later in life provided by quality early childhood educational opportunities. Out of every lesson in the semester, that reading seemed to grab students’ attention and heartstrings like no other. It illustrates in simple terms the prejudice of our educational system and lays bare the ways in which we cannot simply expect all young people to miraculously overcome the structural barriers they had no part in creating. Equal opportunity through education is one of those core American values that we pride ourselves in even while that ideal is far from our reality. I listened to a podcast<sup>36</sup> in summer 2022 that introduced me to Bill Ayers, a person with a storied history indeed, but I was particularly drawn to his approach to liberation through the education system. In Ayers’ *Demand the Impossible* (2016), he outlines the operating belief of the Mississippi Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights Era:

In schools where teachers and students have their minds set on freedom, folks are encouraged and empowered to name and explain themselves, to describe their situations and their pathways, to bring their own wisdom and experience into the

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<sup>36</sup> *Mother Country Radicals* “Chapter 2: Days of Rage” by Zayed Ayers-Dorne about the 1970s Weather Underground Organization

room, to wonder what's next and to act on whatever the known demands. Human agency finds its rightful place at the center of the educational experience (160).

While I am not implying that SEED's model is anything close to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Freedom Schools, I did take inspiration from that legacy and vision.<sup>37</sup>

My time at SEED working to offer alternative pathways to success for at-risk young adults in East Knoxville has opened my eyes to the liberatory aspects of education, peer solidarity, and community care work. However, I have no clear answer to the question of whether the Career Readiness Program model itself works. Deniece Thomas, Deputy Commissioner of Workforce Learning and Development with the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, said in a community meeting on January 6, 2020, that, "labor force participation among adult African American males is lower than it was during the Great Depression." Since 2009, SEED has served close to 200 young adults.<sup>38</sup> I have engaged with participants and met many alumni who credit their experience in the program as life-changing or paradigm-shifting. For many who come to SEED, a job is not just a form of income, but also a means of reintegrating into a community. A job is a purpose, an exchange, a service to society. It is impossible to fully quantify the impact a program has on a young person, but I see its potential every day and with every participant I've worked with. On the other hand, 8 weeks is a frighteningly condensed amount of time to address and overcome the hurdles that these young adults have faced in order to become "career ready." For example, the programmatic model that ChicagoCRED designed to reintegrate former gang members in South Side Chicago (from street outreach to job placement) takes upwards of 2 years, sometimes much longer.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, I grapple with the contradictions of the work I do in attempting to prepare young adults to participate in the current labor market even as I critique it. These young people are some of the most alienated and exploited in our society, and this work in many ways reproduces them to serve the same system that operates to keep them down. I know through my theoretical training in racial capitalism to "situate [an] analysis of racial domination within an analysis of capitalism" (Burawoy 2021:113). While directing the Career Readiness Program I have seen the

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/exploring-history-freedom-schools>

<sup>38</sup> This number is probably higher, but it is difficult to find much in the form of formal records from the first decade of operation.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.chicagocred.org/our-approach/>

destructive process of commodification under late stage capitalism, of reducing the value of everything to its market rate, despite its intrinsic merit. SEED has been fighting an uphill battle to create pathways out of poverty for young adults for almost 15 years. The material effects of systemic and generational poverty across East Knoxville – such as lack of access to reliable transportation, healthcare, safe housing, contraception and sexual education, childcare, and more – continue to reproduce insurmountable barriers to gainful employment, and by extension, personal and community development for Black Knoxville.

### **The Radical Imagination at Work**

The second model I am examining is SEED’s approach to anti-poverty work in East Knoxville, through a reflection of my time as an employee. Doing this extremely frontline work with a threadbare budget is microcosmic of the larger structures that under-resourced communities operate within; SEED is attempting something wildly grassroots, and is therefore forced to manipulate the scant resources available. It hopes to offer an alternative means for disadvantaged young people to succeed beyond what the current system provides, but that radical mission is in many ways inoperable under the corporate framework that the executive leadership brings from many years in the used car business where profitability reigns supreme and crisis permeates the day-to-day. I think of Victor Ray’s “Theory of Racialized Organizations” (2019) and wonder how that theory might apply to a Black-led organization who still sees Whiteness and capitalist growth as the ideal to strive towards. When a nonprofit does not work to actively affirm the values it espouses, I believe it is doomed to fail.

Reliance on foundation giving and modeling corporate structure and culture puts immense pressure on nonprofit productivity measures and the workers responsible for achieving them. This is not to mention what happens to the integrity of the work itself when that money comes from the likes of the Haslam and Boyd families.<sup>40</sup> Authors Burrowes, Cousins, Rojas, and Ude from the organization Sista II Sista write about how philanthropic giving functions primarily to reproduce the interests of capitalism and elite hegemony: “Philanthropy was not created to

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<sup>40</sup> At the same time that Randy Boyd is orchestrating a massive downtown development project surrounding the new publicly-funded baseball stadium on the site of a former bustling Black neighborhood, SEED received a gift from the Boyd Family Foundation to fund their second solar home in East Knoxville. This is a strategic move by Boyd, who has political aspirations and is looking for philanthropic opportunities to gain credibility in the Black community.

sustain any organization, movement, or idea that would undermine the goals of that small percentage of the population that controls most of society's wealth in the first place" (2007:232).<sup>41</sup> Funding is, of course, a necessary evil of non-profit work in these times, but the authors offer the alternatives of grassroots fundraising and social enterprise (i.e. income-generating) projects to pursue visions of a community-based economic system beyond the grip of elite charity. These alternative models, however, require much more energy and dedication to sustainable change than SEEED is currently capable or willing to invest.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted SEEED immensely, nearly causing it to shut its doors. Funding was cut, grants were pulled, staff was laid off, and the organization simply did not have the technological capacity to transition to a virtual modality. Emerging from those years, SEEED went after any grant or project they could get their hands on in order to keep the organization funded. The effect was an unclear organizational focus ('mission creep') and resulted in a massive strain on the organizational staff to meet the deliverables under austere conditions and without proper training. That tension was compounded by the managerial chaos and general void of leadership that I witnessed during my time at SEEED. SEEED also continues to rely on low-wage, almost exclusively women labor, many of whom are single mothers.<sup>42</sup> My grasp of Black feminist literature reminds me that so much of "progress" in this country has been borne out by Black women performing essential care work for far less than the value they produce. Again, while I choose not to divulge details into my experience, I will share that in my year and nine months at SEEED, I witnessed the turnover of more than ten young women of color due to various reasons, but ultimately a workplace culture that is inhospitable to them. I can attest to the material and individual impacts of an organization that deeply lacks diversity in its governance and bears deep-seated venture capitalist and Evangelical-patriarchal ideology.

A year into working at SEEED, I read *Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life* (Kerr 2013) in preparation to transition from president into the co-captain role on my women's rugby team. The lessons I gleaned from that read began with a need for authenticity – knowing yourself, your values, and your 'why' – and integrity – cultivating trust

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<sup>41</sup> From the volume *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (2007) edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

<sup>42</sup> This is not to mention the reliance on cheap labor in the form of AmeriCorps VISTA members. AmeriCorps volunteers are meant to serve in "capacity building" background roles; however in my year of service, I was asked to do the equivalent of at least two full-time staff positions for the federal poverty wage (\$13,590/year).

by honoring your word. Effective leaders have the discipline to not only uphold their own character but also design environments that build strong internal culture for their team. The challenge for any team is to translate a shared vision into tangible progress. I found myself reflecting on the ways in which SEED could benefit from those commitments to organizational sustainability and mission-driven results; in other words, a commitment to turn a lofty vision into concrete action. Amara H. Pérez, another author from the edited volume *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, explains how her organization looked with intentionality “at ways to develop an organizational culture and practice inspired more by revolutionary and holistic paradigms than corporate and business models. The work is not just about what we do, but how we do it; the process is just as important as the outcome” (2007:97). In the nonprofit sector, this is referred to as ‘mission alignment,’ which asks the questions: what problem is your mission aiming to address; what are the root causes of the problem; and does your organization have practices and policies that ignore, exacerbate, or intentionally address those root causes? In the workplace, this can look like a democratic cooperative model rather than the hierarchical, inaccessible model of governance that SEED currently practices.

“Etymologically, ‘radical’ refers to an orientation that aims to get at the root of things” (Khasnabish 2020:1718). My experience doing anti-oppression community work within the neoliberal non-profit has only affirmed my belief that the personal is political and it all must start at home. Critiques aside, SEED continues to chase down a truly transformative vision: building generational wealth through career and personal development and sustainable homeownership (“development without displacement”) through an “equity framework” by acknowledging and centering the historical inequality and generational trauma of the marginalized communities in Knoxville. However, it must practice the values it wishes to see in the world, as difficult as it may be to do so. Here I turn to Haiven and Khasnabish’s “radical imagination . . . to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be. It is the courage and the intelligence to recognize that the world can and should be changed” (2014:3). It reflects not only the capacity to conceptualize a different social reality but also animates the individual to act on those daydreams. The Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute is one resource for movement



workers to strengthen their imaginations, their relationship with each other, and the transformative justice work they aim to do.<sup>43</sup>

Reflecting on my first foray into the profession of social change work, I am grateful for the sociological perspective I had developed throughout my higher education. In *Public Sociology*, Burawoy defines sociology as “a science that is built on moral commitment, on values that we hold deeply with others – freedom, reason, equality, solidarity” (2021:4). Whether in the academy or not, I have always been a lifelong student of human nature and this social experiment of ours; the reflection, like the work, is ever ongoing. Through this experience, I’ve learned that it takes not an insignificant amount of emotional labor and social adeptness to be a compelling leader, and investment in infrastructure will almost always pay off over chasing the new shiny thing. I was also exposed to many approaches to social movement work. I learned of folks attempting Emergent Strategy, described as “a path that runs counter to the competitive, power-over, urgency culture of capitalism,” and concluded that SEED does not fall into that camp. This is in part due to the organization’s internal leadership and decision-making, but also because the vision of pulling these young adults up by their bootstraps is close to utopic when held up to the current context of systemic, racialized poverty that has plagued Knoxville throughout its history. I plan to carry these historical, personal, and structural lessons learned into future movement work as we all continue to strive for a more equitable Knoxville.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://esii.org/about/>

## CONCLUSION

I began this report with a brief, racially-critical history of Knoxville's urban development to trace the origins and lasting impacts of post-Civil Rights geographic segregation. The issues with which Black Knoxville have always dealt with – poverty, housing segregation, and community violence – continue to this day. Over the past two years at SEEED I have had to learn to numb myself to the depth and breadth of violence the East Knoxville community routinely experiences. In the social work and nonprofit spheres, we know of ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), but I wonder what to call it when the trauma is sustained, internalized, made normal throughout a young person's life.<sup>44</sup> We also know that someone is profiting from this violence: gun sales go up every time there's a shooting, and a new gun and ammo outlet recently opened in East Knoxville where a grocery store used to be.<sup>45</sup> SEEED's most recent community needs survey conducted with the help of Three<sup>3</sup> in 2018-19 *still* identified gun violence as one of the biggest concerns respondents had about their East side community.

In spring 2022, \$450,000 was awarded from the City to the newly formed non-profit, Turn Up Knox.<sup>46</sup> SEEED was integral in the formation of this new start up in partnership with Knoxville's Office of Community Safety, and acted as its fiscal sponsor until it gained 501(c)3 status.<sup>47</sup> The goals of Turn Up Knox include connecting those proven to be most at risk for gun violence with the resources they need to break the cycle, reducing gun deaths through mediation and de-escalation, and centering community outreach and direct mediation of neighborhood conflicts by trained interrupters known and trusted by residents.<sup>48</sup> This approach is meant to address East Knoxville's immediate need for direct peer-to-peer outreach and mediation in the streets, as well as the long-term need to build alternatives to traditional policing models of violence intervention. Turn Up Knox now exists as a separate entity from SEEED, but reflects

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<sup>44</sup> See <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.knoxtntoday.com/gun-shop-headed-for-east-knoxville/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.knoxnews.com/story/news/local/2022/09/21/knoxville-gun-violence-turn-up-knox-program-tn-break-cycle/7950643001/>

<sup>47</sup> In April 2022, some SEEED delegates traveled to Chicago to meet with [ChicagoCRED](#) and learn more about their violence intervention programming.

<sup>48</sup>

<https://www.knoxnews.com/story/news/crime/2022/02/18/knoxvilles-record-breaking-gun-violence-calls-better-solutions/6598821001/>

the original mission of the young founders: to disrupt the cycles of violence in their neighborhoods.

Poverty begets violence and violence will almost always bring more hardship. Six decades have passed since urban renewal uprooted lives, homes, and whole communities of Black Knoxville, forever changing the landscape. This report began by calling upon Tilly to foreground the importance of “microhistorical studies of structures and processes” (1988:709).<sup>49</sup> More than just stories for the history books, we have to think beyond the trap of the “progress paradigm” and be critical of how time serves only to reproduce the structures that we allow to persist (Seamster and Ray 2018). To again employ Mills’ sociological imagination, one should approach a contemporary social problem by understanding the historical context that produced it, the structures that have been erected to govern it, and the human agency exercised around it. SEED is an anti-poverty organization born from Knoxville’s historical reality that is both operating within and resisting against the structures that remain in the landscape. In the words of Ruth Wilsom Gilmore, abolition geography should be grounded in “a research agenda that centers on race as a condition of existence and as a category of analysis, because the territoriality of power is a key to understanding racism” (2022:152).

In closing out my tenure in this Applied Sociology M.A., I am grateful for the opportunity to cut my professional teeth pursuing socio-ecological justice through truly grassroots means. Even the critiques I levied have taught me lessons in the complexities of sociological praxis in the face of deep injustices. Whether we recognize ourselves as political beings or not, “politics is not something that only happens in authorized, hegemonic spaces but is woven through the fabric of our collective social life” (Khasnabish 2020:1719). Every drive on James White Parkway reminds me that it was someone else’s political choice to pave over Black communities for my convenience as a white middle-class car-owner. It’s also a collective political choice that more than 38 million people live in poverty in the United States, despite it being one of the world’s richest countries (Desmond 2023). Society is what we make of it, and practicing austerity only perpetuates oppression. We live within self-created structures, and therefore have the agency – and the responsibility – to imagine and build something different.

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<sup>49</sup> That is, “studying the experiences of individuals and well-defined groups within the limits set by large-scale structures and processes” (Tilly 1988:706).

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## **VITA**

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