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A Freedom School Project

The Wright Museum Goes Green

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Museums are usually places that preserve the past. But the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History is also shaping the future. Since the very beginning it has challenged people to think differently about what we value about our history. As one of the first museums in the country devoted to African-American culture, it has placed the struggles of people for a just world at the heart of what it does. The Charles H. Wright Museum is an important place to nurture our young people in their commitment to social justice. This is why they have decided to support the emerging Independent Freedom School movement.

The museum's reinforcement of community-based education now includes housing a gardening program on a terrace of the Museum grounds. The raised-bed garden is another way in which the Charles H. Wright Museum is transcending institutional norms.

"The whole spiritual concept of planting something and removing the weeds and nurturing it and seeing it grow and then being able to eat it's a way for not only the children, but the parents to know that you have to have a place where you can grow your own food," Charles H. Wright Museum Vice-President Charles Ferrell told *Riverwise*. "You know it's clean, it's organic. There are multiple reasons why this sends a higher message to the community around self-determination."

Responding to the State-led dismantling of the Detroit public school system, the Detroit Independent Freedom Schools Movement (DIFS) was initiated in 2016 by a group of activists from Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management (D-REM). D-REM activists organized initial meetings to bring together local educators, groups involved in education advocacy as well as enthusiastic volunteers to give birth to DIFS.

Photos by Gloria House (top), Piper Carter (second and third), and Gloria House (bottom)

Charles H. Wright Museum CEO Jhanita Moore specifically credits Dr. Gloria House, a D-REM member, with spearheading the effort and understanding "the broad need to educate these young people...not just about what they should learn in the classrooms, but the broader lessons about how to live complete lives; the health and wholeness of their bodies; the longevity and quality of their life and the lives of families and other people around them. A lot of that revolves around food, especially in our community and especially in Detroit."

Inspired by the Freedom Schools of the South that flourished during the Civil Rights movement, DIFS offers free, African-centered, enriching educational experiences for Detroit's children and families with the assistance of the community volunteers.

During their first year, DIFS organized four sites across the city. Each site worked to provide children with opportunities to learn and grow surrounded by adults who love and care about them. Curriculum is determined by the site coordinators working with families, children and volunteers.

The Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History offered space for DIFS educators during the 2016-2017 school year. As the educational activities for children grew, family members began to meet with organizers to spread awareness around issues that affect our children in public education.

Bianca Danzy began her relationship with the DIFS as a parent and volunteer saying, she "fell in love with what was going on there." Already an established figure in the urban farming community through her venture, "Real Food By Bianca", she urged DIFS coordinators to incorporate a green space into the learning environment. Danzy now heads the youth gardening program for the DIFS at the Charles H. Wright Museum. Her gardening class is derived from a program and book called, "A Taste of African Heritage", in which students grow vegetables specifically for preparing meals that emphasize nutrition and African culture.

"Everything I do is plant-based, to show the children, especially Black children, that we can eat sustainably and it can be delicious," Danzy told *Riverwise*.

The construction and design of the DIFS garden was implemented by DIFS volunteers active at the Museum, under the direction of Kwame Mensah. Mensah is one of the founding members of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) and the former farm manager at D-Town Farms. The site was chosen partly for its full exposure to the sun, allowing a longer growing season. Mensah told *Riverwise*. He says DIFS students plan on growing up to 30 different vegetable varieties, including hot and cold crops, for harvest at various times of the year.



Photos by Gloria House (top), Piper Carter (second), and Gloria House (third and bottom)

Wright Museum administrators maintain that the evolving mission of the Museum to not only educate, but to integrate with its supporters and the community around it. CEO Moore says that it is vital to host the Detroit Independent Freedom School's efforts not only from an educational perspective, but from a historical perspective. The Freedom School represents a recent history of Black people "making a way from no way" whether in the 1960s, the Jim Crow South, or now, in a post-industrial, State-controlled urban climate.

"I think that this Museum sets that kind of example, that in this place you can have a garden, you can do that work," Moore says. "I think teaching those kinds of lessons is really important and that's what this Museum should be doing."

The DIFS garden is just one part of the Charles H. Wright Museum's commitment to progressive programming. Over the last several months, the Museum has presented a jam-packed schedule of speakers and panels on all facets of the movement for Black liberation, both nationally and locally, as part of an ongoing exhibit and extensive program around the 1967 Rebellion.

According to Vice-President Ferrell, the Charles H. Wright is expanding the definition of a Museum in many other ways. They have embraced an outreach program to prisoners; they are also making international connections through educational tours that will take students and educators to the Caribbean for presentations by historians like Randall Robinson.

But it's the garden on the terrace that provides immediate opportunities for children to observe nature at its finest, providing sustenance for the body and the mind. "As a history museum and a sacred place, we want to be an example of how to use limited space to grow food," Ferrell says. "We want to lead and embrace the garden because it really offers a lot of educational opportunities. It's another way that the Charles Wright is attempting to be more than just a museum—but to also be a center for the community to come and say, this is our institution."

For more information on the Detroit Independent Freedom Schools, visit www.drem.org/freedom-schools.

Raised on Detroit's northwest side, Eric Thomas Campbell is the co-ordinator of *Riverwise Magazine* and a member of the editorial staff. Eric worked as a staff writer for the Michigan Citizen Newspaper from 2007-2012, covering a wide range of issues affecting Detroit's majority Black community. He has frequently written press releases for the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center.

