

Alexandria White

South Sacramento Building Health Communities (BHC) Resident Profile

In 2010, The California Endowment (TCE) launched the Building Healthy Communities (BHC) initiative, a 10-year, \$1 billion program to improve the health of 14 communities in California. The South Sacramento area is one of the 14 communities where residents, community-based organizations, local government, and educational institutions collaborate to advance racially equitable policies and practices.

Alexandria White (Alex) moved to Sacramento from the Bay Area in the fall of 2016 with her husband, 3-year-old son, and 2-day-old daughter. Alex and her husband wanted to buy a home as a financial investment, and after researching the home values in Oakland, they decided to move to Sacramento for greater buying power:

“Property is huge for wealth transference. For African Americans, income and equality is huge. For every \$100 a white family has, we have \$5 ... having a master’s degree in literature, we are still trying to build our resources up as a family because we do not have the same access to capital and all that stuff that other families have. So, it was a huge financial and economic investment.”

Since moving to the South Oak Park neighborhood in Sacramento, Alex and her family have settled into their home, and Alex has become civically engaged in her neighborhood and accepted an Associate Professor of English position at Sacramento City Community College (SCC). Alex’s path to civic engagement began when she received a garden through Yisrael Family Urban Farm, Urban Roots Garden Build program.

Prior to moving, Alex explored Sacramento-based activities for her and her family to ease the transition from the Bay Area and discovered the Yisrael’s and their garden program. Alex had a vegetable garden in Oakland, had become accustomed to eating fresh, organic, locally grown produce, and wanted to continue gardening in Sacramento. In addition, Alex knew that she would be caring for her children full-time rather than seeking paid employment after moving to Sacramento and “wanted to try to grow some portion of our vegetables,” because “we were going to be broke but I still wanted to have a certain standard of eating for my family.”

Shortly after moving to Sacramento, Alex saw Judith and Chanowk Yisrael, owners and operators of Yisrael Family Urban Farm, at the house next door to hers. She immediately recognized them as the “garden people,” ran outside, got Judith’s contact information and started the process of applying for a garden. In March 2017, the Yisrael’s brought approximately 30 volunteers to Alex’s house for the garden build. The Yisrael’s developed the Urban Roots Garden Build program to include hands-on learning for garden recipients and volunteers. According to Alex, as the volunteers installed the garden, Chanowk would describe the purpose and benefits of what they were doing. For example, as the volunteers laid down cardboard and then applied a mulch layer, “Chanowk explained that everywhere that we did the cardboard and mulch, next year you will be able to use that to grow food.” A year later, Alex followed Chanowk’s tutelage, tilled the mulched areas into the soil, and expanded her vegetable garden.



Urban Agriculture Leading to People Power

The Yisrael's strongly encourage folks who receive a garden to volunteer at a subsequent build to cultivate community through civic engagement. Alex took this expectation to heart and began volunteering almost daily at the Yisrael Family Urban Farm or the Fruitridge Community Collaborative (FRCC) community garden shepherded by the Yisrael's, both of which are in the South Oak Park neighborhood. By volunteering, Alex continued to learn from Judith and Chanowk through their dynamic and individualized teaching style:

"[The Yisrael's] use an engaged pedagogy, it is active and theoretical, but they actually apply everything they theorize about, and that is a lot of wisdom, a lot of mentorship. I have been mentored by them in a lot of different ways."

" They show what needs to be done rather than just talking about it. They really show what we need to do to become empowered. They are not trying to leave this neighborhood, they are trying to change it from the inside out and that is really powerful. "



The Yisraels use urban agriculture to awaken residents' critical consciousness to inspire them to become civically engaged to affect change. For Judith and Chanowk, this includes developing resident leaders for long-term and sustainable impact.

Prior to moving to Sacramento, Alex was an adjunct professor at an Oakland college, and taught about the industrial food system. When volunteering, Alex observed the Yisrael's educating others and was struck by how they connect with people and make complicated issues such as the food system "accessible," especially for youth of color:

"What I like about Chanowk and Judith is they can speak to youth of color. The city kids, they can identify with Chanowk and Judith. There is nothing out there to connect with urban kids in terms of curriculum and books around food systems."

In their quest to use urban agriculture to empower residents, the Yisrael's are also building community in the Oak Park neighborhood. Alex imparted that all folks came from communal origins but that people of color, "thrive in communal environments, village-like spaces." The Yisraels are using the farm and affiliated programs to build an environment for folks to thrive. According to Alex, the Yisraels:

"... help create a village energy, a community energy. They are not old enough to be elders yet, but they are like the unspoken leaders of this [Oak Park] village."

Community Roots through Civic Engagement

The Yisrael's have a strong, "sense of social responsibility," that inspired Alex to seek out other opportunities for civic engagement. When Alex attended her first South Oak Park Community Association (SOPCA) meeting and saw Chanowk, she felt as though, "I know someone in this space, so I can be here too ... it made me more comfortable that I had a connection with somebody there." Over time Alex became a SOPCA board member and volunteered to coordinate the KaBOOM! Playground installation at Jack Davis Park. Alex also joined the Soil Sisters who are focused on healing each other, "while we are healing the soil and our community."

Occasionally, folks ask Alex the point of volunteering when she is not getting paid. Alex identified the "deficit mindset" as a problem that prevents people from seeing that, "giving and receiving are the same thing ... the act of giving opens up the space for receiving." She explained that this is especially true for folks with limited financial means because, "our inner resources are so connected to our outer resources that they do not feel like they have anything to give." But for Alex, "being engaged in community, it is currency, it is a type of capitalism, but people are throwing it away and do not see the benefit and I feel like that is why communities suffer."

Eventually Alex sought employment and was hired as the Project Coordinator with the Fruitridge Stockton Community Incubator Lead (CIL) for the Black Child Legacy Campaign (BCLC), a community-driven movement to reduce the premature death of African American children in Sacramento County. The Fruitridge Stockton CIL is located at the FRCC, and when Alex volunteered at the FRCC community garden, she became familiar with the organizations involved in the BCLC Campaign. Alex believes that she was hired for the BCLC Project Coordinator position in-part because she "had familiarity with the operations out of this space [FRCC]." Alex went through the BCLC and SCC hiring process simultaneously. A few weeks after accepting the BCLC Project Coordinator position, she was offered the SCC Assistant Professor job and attributes her volunteer experience as a factor in the decision to hire her. When Alex interviewed with the President of the college he told her, "you are bringing added value to this department because of your community work." Even though Alex was, "a little sad" to leave the BCLC position, she is looking forward to bringing her community connections into the classroom and exposing her students to the rewards of civic engagement. Alex summed up the path from volunteering with the Yisrael's to working at SCC:

"I just feel like everything was a chain reaction, working with [Judith and Chanowk Yisrael], getting involved with SOPCA, then doing the KaBOOM! build ... then building up to working for BCLC, and then to the city college. It has been a chain reaction that [Judith and Chanowk Yisrael] were the catalyst of ... it has been awesome, it has been amazing. I have learned so many things ... I feel like I have been initiated into something else."

The Yisrael's are creating an inclusive, "village vibe," which Alex believes is foundational to building a thriving community for people of color. Alex has become integral to the South Oak Park community fabric and is having a significant and meaningful impact on the neighborhood. Alex and her family are flourishing in Sacramento, and the Yisrael's are a factor in her family's successful transition to Sacramento from the Bay Area:

"We would not have survived here without our connection to [Judith and Chanowk Yisrael] or other community members. Roots take time to build, and our roots are getting pretty established. Our taproots are going back to the Bay, that is where my mom lives, my sisters live. I grew up there. But we are also trying to establish a strong root system here and [Judith and Chanowk Yisrael] are definitely part of that root system that feed us as a family."