



Ujamaa Collective – Ageless Innovation at Work

New People March 2016

By Ron Gaydos

The Ujamaa Collective has roots in the distant past of African culture and is bringing economic progress for local women of African descent today.

I stood in Ujamaa's store, surrounded by the product of many African American women's hard work, as Executive Director LaKeisha Wolf traced Ujamaa's history. "Celeta Hickman, a local community leader, and a library assistant, curator, performer, and jewelry maker, began to study Africana to gain insights for community economic empowerment at around 2007."

At about that time, Ms. Wolf continued, as the planning for a possible casino took place on the Hill and until 2009, there was a lot of community strife concerning what was best for the community. Conversations often included the many women who made handmade crafts and the economic opportunity that gave them.

Ms. Hickman recalled African women's traditional role in governing the marketplace. The keystone of the marketplace is the Esusu: a rotating credit circle (also called Isusu or Susu in various languages around Nigeria). Members decided who participated and whose turn it was to use the Esusu for their business needs. Trust and mutual support were the foundation of the Esusu. Living up to the word *ujamaa*, meaning cooperative economics in Swahili, was very important to the group.

Ms. Hickman started an Esusu for women of the African diaspora in the Hill District and Ujamaa Collective was born. The Esusu usually meets every two weeks after the member who has used the fund pays it back into the Esusu. Member contributions started at \$5 per member, then went to \$10, and are now \$20. That level of financial commitment is set to be as affordable to members and still be an effective resource.

Members have a stake in each other's success; each member's success sustains the rest of the group. Therefore members are very concerned about how everyone does.

“They go beyond just checking in when it’s their turn to use the Esusu funds, and do what they can to ensure each member’s success”, affirmed Ms. Wolf.

Members of the Ujamaa Collective began to hold events, attend events together, and started an open air market on Center Avenue on an old basketball court. Help from the Heinz Endowments enabled Ujamaa to make improvements to the market site and develop their organization. Eventually the members developed a strategic plan whose short term goal was a retail space for selling members’ products. A longer term goal was to establish a production space as well. There is a small crafts workspace now in their store and office at 1901 Center Avenue in the Hill, so they’re on their way to reaching that goal.

Ujamaa’s mission is “to create spaces, opportunities, networks, education and support for women of African descent to grow as entrepreneurs, artisans, and servant-leaders so that we may “lift as we climb”.” The staff works in business development activities, community engagement, and an urban agriculture incubator program. Balancing business and community affairs always has swings back and forth, but the group is resilient.

Beyond facilities and business development, Ujamaa has a bold vision for their community and what they intend to do about it. “When you’ve been the commodity in the economy, there’s a psychology that develops around that that’s self-defeating. [Instead,] Let’s commit together to do what we have to do despite all of the pressures in our lives,” said Ms. Wolf, “We need to value ourselves. It’s difficult to value your own work.” The Collective must overcome the barriers resulting from the culture of white supremacy, neighborhood disinvestment, and then, also, the learning curve and business challenges that starting a new enterprise always entails. Ujamaa is working for nothing less than community economic empowerment by tapping the deep knowledge of the community’s women and their heritage.

Ujamaa’s members are never afraid to reach into their history and culture, and even the broader community, for resources to succeed. As they often tackle problems and tasks, Ms. Wolf says, “We always think ‘Shoot! Someone’s done this before!’ when we’re looking for how to do something.” Then they often use that example as a model for their action.

Looking to the future, shared sales space, shared marketing development of worker cooperatives, joint supply purchases, food production, and catering for the many events in the community are priorities.

Generally, Ujamaa aims to create a new standard: teaching to share, to better appreciate one’s own value, and raise awareness of the benefits and necessity of fair trade. Referring to the need to assert their vital place in the economy, Ms. Wolf says, “women are the number one consumer group but we too often undervalue our work.”

Ujamaa is beginning an ambitious youth program to teach kids to become designers and makers, to plan the finance and launch of their own enterprise, and work through their challenges. A pilot with 8-10 girls is planned for late spring 2016 as the school year winds down. Ms. Wolf said they especially want to impart Ujamaa’s shared value approach to the girls: creating shared value for the participants, the community, and the earth that sustains

everything. The pilot will offer them new skills, opportunities to use them, a sense of value in their work and their partners. Outcomes will be to shape a competent cooperative, graduate new business people, and give the girls a sense of satisfaction from taking their ideas to fruition.

Looking forward, Ms Wolf declared “anything that can create shared value, we’re going to do!”

More information about the Ujamaa Collective and the online store is at <http://www.ujamaacollective.org> and their location is 1901 Center Avenue Pittsburgh 15219.



Ujamaa Collective members. Group shot by Ujamaa Collective

Ron Gaydos is a consultant in inclusive economic development, entrepreneurship, and organizational strategy. He is a member of the Thomas Merton Center’s New Economy Campaign, and Co-Founder of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives. (www.PittsburghChamber.coop)



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOSS.