

FREEDOM DREAMS: A Herstory of the People of Color Sustainable Housing Network

By Tavi Baker

*yes,
each weekend like this
each gathering of us
is in between time
when we wake up to each other
share smiles and possibility
over black beans and corn fritters
dream deep beneath the stars
and repeat*

*we are each other's remedy
we are within reach
right now*

This is part of a poem I wrote in 2016 at the West Coast Communities Conference, when Deseree Fontenot and I were invited as keynote speakers representing People of Color Sustainable Housing Network¹ (POCSHN—pronounced “potion”). POCSHN is a resource network for people of color building intentional, healthy, collective and affordable housing communities in the Bay Area and beyond, founded in response to rapid displacement, gentrification, and housing insecurity for communities of color. Our presentation was called “Moving Beyond Diversity to Collective Liberation: Engaging the Communities Movement in Racial and Economic Justice.”² After our talk, participants donated \$400, our first funds raised for our fledgling network.

In this article, I share my perspective as a woman of color cofounder. Reflecting back to 2015 and beyond, I trace POCSHN’s and my intentional community origin story—a story of passion, persistence, and synergy. I describe what led me to seek community in the first place, POCSHN’s impact on the San Francisco Bay Area, and lessons learned.

POCSHN was officially launched on my birthday, February 2, 2015 on Meetup, a social media platform for hosting and organizing activities and gatherings for people and communities with similar interests. I had resigned from my job in Oakland and had been asking myself the question, “What would I do with my time if I didn’t have to worry about money?” The an-

swer: build an intentional community for people of color. One Sunday at the end of a weekly BIPOC meditation gathering, I talked to Lailan Huen, a seasoned community organizer, about my idea. She suggested that we expand the focus from building one community to building an entire network. It sounded a bit intimidating, but I agreed and registered our group on Meetup. It was thrilling to put this idea out into the world and watch our virtual community grow, one member at a time. Eight years later, our Facebook network has over 5,000 members, and we recently launched a POCSHN Midwest monthly online event.

Our core organizing collective grew over the years to include seven women of color who shared a similar vision for community. We had all been longing for a space to nurture our dreams of community: Brandi Mack, who founded the Butterfly Movement³ to uplift Black women and girls; Desi Fontenot, focused on liberating land and queering ecological education; Marissa Ashkar, who dreamt of an urban-rural community that supported child-raising collectively; Rona Fernandez, lifelong Bay Area resident and racial justice activist; Casey Bastiaans, former Oakland anti-displacement activist; Lina Buffington, social entrepreneur and the first director of East Bay Permanent Real Estate Cooperative (EB PREC)⁴ described below; and I, who sought an expansive intergenerational way to build extended family and community. Thanks to funding from the San Francisco Foundation, Wangüi H. joined us in 2021 as POCSHN’s Outreach and Engagement Manager.

Through workshops, tours, and retreats, POCSHN has reached hundreds of people of color yearning for traditional ways of being and living in community. After a residential retreat we hosted in Ukiah, one participant said: “I cherish this opportunity to connect both with other people of color and parts of my inner self which didn’t know what I was missing.”

The seeds of my community dreams were originally planted in 1997 when I was introduced to University of California’s Student Cooperative system in Berkeley. I was one of 21 Black students to move into the newly renovated African American Theme House or “Afro House,” on Prospect Street, and two years later, I moved into the Rochdale Coop, also part of the student cooperative system. Then in 2009, I attended a cohous-

ing tour organized by East Bay Cohousing (EBCOHO)⁵ and learned about Parker Street Cooperative, where I live now. I was grateful for the affordability of a limited equity cooperative, but still yearned for a diverse and intentional community.

As an alternative, I gathered a group of friends to explore buying a four-plex together. We met consistently for two years, but our efforts ended up fizzling out and we went our separate ways. However, one friend ended up moving into Parker Street Cooperative 10 years after I did.

I continued to attend numerous cooperative housing meetings, workshops, and trainings in the San Francisco Bay Area and was often one of the few people of color in attendance. The first community land trust in the United States, New Communities, was created in 1969 to support black farmers⁶, but Black and Brown people were largely missing from the contemporary Bay Area cooperative housing scene. Guided by Jessica Gordon Nembhard's book, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*, and Diana Leafe Christian's book, *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities*, we at POCSHN were determined to recentre people of color in the intentional communities movement.

Looking back over the last eight years since POCSHN'S inception, we can measure our success in sparks of possibility, what Robin Kelley⁷ calls freedom dreams. Three main sparks that resulted from POCSHN's foundational work include a real estate cooperative, a mixed-use cultural hub, and an education and training institute.

East Bay Permanent Real Estate Coop, Inc (EB PREC) was

born out of a collaboration between POCSHN and the Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC)⁸ to help BIPOC and allied communities to take properties permanently off the speculative market and create community controlled assets. Under the leadership of Noni Session, a third generation West Oaklander and grassroots organizer, EB PREC is now comprised of 740 member owners, with six properties under community control, including Esther's Orbit Room⁹, a mixed-use historic Black Arts venue in West Oakland, and Pippin St, a 10-unit apartment complex in East Oakland serving long-term residents.

Liberated 23rd Ave¹⁰ is a queer and trans people of color-centered mixed-use property in East Oakland, established in 2017. POCSHN helped broker relationships with the Oakland Community Land Trust and was part of a huge community effort to help residents and tenants purchase this building from their landlord. The hybrid residential-commercial cultural hub houses The Bikery, a Queer & Trans People Of Color collectively-run house and community garden (SOL—Sustaining Ourselves Locally), and Shaolin Life, a martial arts and a self-defense studio.

The Community Co-Ownership Initiative¹¹ is a partnership between POCSHN and the Northern California Land Trust, our fiscal sponsor, along with other members of the Bay Area CLT Consortium (BACCLT)¹², to diversify and expand access to shared ownership and resident controlled housing through leadership training, development of new financing tools, and technical support. Workshops offered over the past four years have included: Fair Housing for Collective Housing, History of Cooperatives and Community Land Trusts, and Conflict Resolution.

Early on, one community organizer said this about POCSHN:

*Tavi Baker, Wangüi Hymes,
Deseree Fontenot,
Yu-Shuan Tarango-Sho,
Lailan Sandra Huen
(see page 3 "ON THE COVER"
text for more info).*



Photo courtesy of Tavi Baker

“The loving, justice-motivated, intentional, persistent imprint you have made in the last year in the Bay Area will ripple through community for years to come.” Since then, POC SHN has impacted the lives of thousands of Bay Area residents with both short-term and long-term living solutions. Now, more than ever, collective, affordable housing and mutual aid are essential to navigating the climate crisis, continuing gentrification and displacement, and multiple pandemics.

Lessons Learned

As we move forward, we strive to integrate the principles that were identified by organizers at The Bay Area Land Justice Convening¹³ in 2019. POC SHN staff helped convene 30 organizers from housing justice groups, indigenous-led organizations, and food and farm justice organizations to seed a 100-year vision for land justice. Held on the territory of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria at the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, the convening was co-organized by staff at POC SHN, Sogorea Te’ Land Trust¹⁴, The Cultural Conservancy¹⁵, Movement Generation¹⁶, and Sustainable Economies Law Center. The six principles and lessons learned from that gathering are listed below:

- **Following indigenous leadership**, particularly the leadership of those whose land we each dwell upon;
- **Healing together, building relationships**: prioritizing structures for collective healing across people, institutions, communities, sectors, issues, areas in the context of specific historical traumas;
- **Ending occupations**: Reparations and redistribution that prioritize Indigenous sovereignty and Black self-determination;
- **Sharing skills and knowledge** such as technical knowledge, policies, land, physical tools, food, medicine, and office space, etc. so everyone has access to means of production;
- **Building our own regenerative economies** and divestment from the current system;
- **Community governance** that follows indigenous leadership, builds regional alliances for movement power, and has the capacity to govern under rapidly changing conditions.

Recently, new and founding POC SHN organizers gathered at the new site of Movement Generation (MG), an ecological justice organization in the San Francisco Bay Area. Desi, now one of MG’s dedicated land stewards, guided us on a tour and described their vision for the 43 acres purchased by Sogorea Te’ Land Trust in 2022.

They plan to build The Justice and Ecology Center¹⁷, the first of its kind in the Bay Area. It will offer a community space for retreats, workshops, and strategy sessions for a wide network of organizers, healers, artists, and earth workers to build capacity

to guide their own communities toward a Just Transition from the extractive economy to regenerative local economies.

As we gathered on the land, I reflected on our original intentions, how far we’ve come, and how much further we have to go. I started this journey with a specific outcome in mind, a building and/or piece of land that could be a sanctuary for myself and other people of color. Eight years later, those freedom dreams are still unfolding. Questions still linger for some of the founding organizers who long for a formal intentional community. At meetings, we would often scrawl “Who is the we?” at the top of a flip chart. Although I dream of visiting BIPOC communities that have sprouted up across the country in recent years, my career aspirations and biological and chosen family have kept me rooted in the Bay Area, where cost of living, wildfires, and lack of generational wealth remain barriers to building intentional BIPOC communities. The BIPOC Intentional Community Council¹⁸, for example, has funding to provide seed grants of only \$4,000 each, which doesn’t go very far.

However, I’ve been truly inspired by the collective land dreams of the broader “we” that have manifested and remind me of the original vision POC SHN crafted years ago: “We are committed to creating an entire ecosystem of POC-centered co-housing, cooperative housing, and intentional communities that are ecologically, emotionally, spiritually and culturally regenerative spaces.”

Standing in the soil, surrounded by acres of possibility, I closed my eyes and remembered.

*yes,
each weekend like this
each gathering of us
is in between time
when we wake up to each other
share smiles and possibility
dream deep beneath the stars
and imagine a different future. 🌸*

Tavi Baker (she/her), MPH, is a cofounder of The People of Color Sustainable Housing Network (pochousingnetwork.com), which partnered with the Sustainable Economies Law Center (SELC) in 2018 to create the East Bay Permanent Real Estate Coop (EB PREC). Her cooperative living experience includes the African American Theme House (Afro House), Rochdale Village, and Parker Street Coop. Tavi is a seeker and connector committed to cultivating spaces of joy, justice, and belonging within herself and communities of color.

1. pochousingnetwork.com

2. “Moving Beyond Diversity Towards Collective Liberation: Weaving the Communities Movement into Intersectional Justice Struggles,” by Deseree Fontenot, COMMUNITIES #178, Spring 2018.

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