CoThinkk: Tipping the Scale Towards Positive Outcomes

One of the many examples of community resilience in Buncombe County.

A Conversation with Tracey Greene-Washington, Founder of CoThinkk

Tracey Greene-Washington, the founder of CoThinkk, is the board chair of The Center for Leadership Innovation, and leads an investment portfolio of statewide investments focused on community economic development across North Carolina. She has over 16 years of experience in the philanthropic and nonprofit sector and is a native of Asheville.

First Steps

“What I was seeing in WNC, and Asheville in particular, was that there was a dynamic cohort of leaders of color doing extraordinary work with an explicit social change agenda focused on yielding positive, collaborative, and equitable outcomes for disenfranchised communities, but they didn’t have access to critical resources,” says CoThinkk founder Tracey Greene-Washington.

“When I began to look at my own grant-making from a statewide institutional perspective, much of the work they were doing was not well aligned with our giving. When I also talked to the local community foundation, many of the efforts of these leaders fit outside of the box in terms of what the foundation was mandated to support or had the ability to support.”

This awareness led her to think about how to tip the scales in a positive direction for these leaders finding a way to connect these emerging leaders to our community’s resource grid.

“I wanted to support these leaders of color doing innovative work to address current pressing issues, while also seeding initiatives for the future in a way that they could really do their best work and not feel paralyzed by the fact that they did not have access to important resources,” says Tracey.

Through her work, Tracey had experienced giving circles nationally.

What is CoThinkk?

“CoThinkk is a giving circle that uses its collective time, talent, and treasure towards investment strategies that address education, economic mobility/opportunity, and leadership development towards impacting some of the most critical social issues facing African-American and Latino communities in Asheville and Western NC.” Source: CoThinkk

“I remembered that giving circles could be very powerful both as a complementary philanthropic tool and as a way for people to garner their own time, talent, and treasure together in a way that really addressed their issues and accelerated impact in their own communities.”

With this in mind, Tracey presented a proposition to leaders to support a new strategy to solve this challenging issue. That resulted in her starting a giving circle here.

CoThinkk was born at a launch event in September 2014 attended by about 50 people. “We gave people an opportunity to talk about what were the most pressing issues, and what they wanted to see work differently,” says Tracey. The launch set the stage for “mobilizing the community in a way that if they could own their own time, talent, and treasure they could support what was most needed in the community—because they had identified it, not because someone else had identified it. And they could lead it as well.”

Gaining Clarity and Direction

Since the launch event, CoThinkk has held monthly meetings and a day-long planning retreat, as well as hosting two free “Catching Dreams” grant writing workshops to help take the mystique out of the grant process, create access to grant dollars, build confidence, and build community.

“The first part of our process was helping people know what a giving circle is and the potential of it,” states Tracey. “Within that, building trust. One of the most important parts of the giving circle process is that people have to trust each other.”

Another piece of the process was strengthening connections between African-American and Latino leaders. According to Tracey, “We talked about how we could get to know each other in a way that creates the necessary space for us to have a really shared, collaborative, and collective agenda.” Using an interpreter, discussions were held comparing the Latino and African American experience in WNC. “People began to break down their assumptions about each other and have real conversations,” Tracey shared. “Historically, our issues show up differently, but many of them are the same in terms of being disenfranchised and disempowered.” From this, CoThinkk will continue to do “the healing work that we need between each other, shore up our collective work, and come together as one.”

CoThinkk went through a process to prioritize their focus areas, landing on economic opportunity/mobility, education, and leadership development.

What’s Next for CoThinkk?

When asked what’s next for CoThinkk, Tracey says, “The next thing we are doing is our big strategic planning retreat on Saturday, June 11. We will use that time to spell out what we want our work to be over the next two to three years and to refine our process around grant-making. This is leading up to a big event in October where we’ll give away our first grants. The grants will be monetary, and accompanied with volunteer time and access to the resource of the skill sets of the membership.”

Looking forward, Tracey is confident that, “by using a community-driven model that leverages the collective time, talent, and treasure of engaged individuals toward a collective impact agenda, CoThinkk can create new systems, processes, and relationships that have the potential to yield equitable outcomes and to support a leadership pipeline of African American and Latino members in our community poised to impact future generations in our region.”

CoThinkk Values

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- **Community, Collaboration, Commitment.**
- **Value:** We value collective action and shared power that bridges silos and taps into underutilized human, social, political and institutional capital.
- **Purpose:** We value trust building that creates non-judgmental spaces that are inclusive and equitable that lead to active and long-term engagement for greater impact.
- **Local:** We value and support local economic mobility for communities of color.
- **Education (Children & Youth):** We value cultivating the energy, passion, and talents of the next generation to create an essential pipeline of leaders; and
- **Systems & Policy Change:** We value and promote civic education and seek to create strategies to help change the patterns of local/regional institutional practices that impede equitable outcomes.

CoThinkk Members

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  - **I am involved in CoThinkk because it is an innovative and authentic approach to addressing common issues in the African American and Latino communities. Personally, I am excited about the opportunity to be part of projects that are creative, colorful, will positively impact where we live, and are developed at the grassroots level. CoThinkk inspires relationship building and connection. I think this is the first step to meaningful social change.”

  - **Carolina McCready**

  - **Historically, churches, mutual aid societies, educational institutions, fraternal and civil rights groups provided economic support to help resolve social and economic inequities within communities of color. CoThinkk brings light to a powerful philanthropic history. Moreover, it has emerged at a critical time, when there are many new leaders surfaced, community organizing and coalition building. A need for a philosophically driven model that engages people of color and benefits initiatives led by them. This is legacy work with city-wide support!”

  - **Sheneika Smith**

Want to Get Involved with CoThinkk?

Join the CoThinkk Facebook group, or email Tracey Greene-Washington at cotinkh@gmail.com for details on upcoming meetings and events. Visit cotinkh.org to make a donation. Follow CoThinkk on Twitter at @B5CoThinkk.

Carolina McCready and Stephanie Swepson-Twitty. Photo: Pro16 Productions

Sheneika Smith and Lesley Gaspar

Buncombe County Health and Human Services

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