

We All Have the Same Goal:

Liberating Marginalized Communities Across These United States of America



By Tanesha Peeples
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I don't think that anyone wrote in their high school yearbook that they wanted to be an activist. Back then, you wanted to be a basketball player, a doctor, or something like that. But I knew already that I wanted to work for the benefit of my community.

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago, in the notorious community of Englewood. Most of the schools in my neighborhood were underperforming, and I was fortunate to be able to go to schools outside of the community. I attended magnet schools including Kenwood Academy, which was right around the corner from Barack Obama's house—one of the highest-performing schools in the city.

My family never really had conversations about going to college, but I made the decision to go because, honestly, that's what everybody else in my high school was doing. I ended up majoring in Political Science, enjoyed it, and was successful. I then decided to go to graduate school at DePaul



University, where I received a degree in urban planning, development, and public service management.

Throughout my college career, I noticed a glaring injustice in my community: I was able to go to good schools, but some of the kids I grew up with—including cousins and neighbors—didn't have that same opportunity. I didn't think that was fair.

This essay was produced in collaboration with the People's Think Tank (PTT). Researchers from PTT interviewed organizers (such as the author of this piece) and worked with them to create these essays. We believe that these essays offer important lessons for movement builders seeking to pursue intersectional organizing, connect communities and movements, build solidarity, and achieve education justice. The views expressed in these essays are the author's and not necessarily those of the People's Think Tank.

Also, as I've grown older, I've seen and understood how the effects of intergenerational and systemic trauma have a colossal impact on individual and communal self-determination.

These dynamics have fueled my passion to help my community develop pathways to a more fair and comfortable quality of life where they thrive—or, at least, gain access to the same opportunities that I was afforded. Even if people don't take advantage of those opportunities, they should at least have access to them. My teenage dream of becoming an activist started me on the road to my adult life's journey as a community advocate.



Creating the Roots Initiative

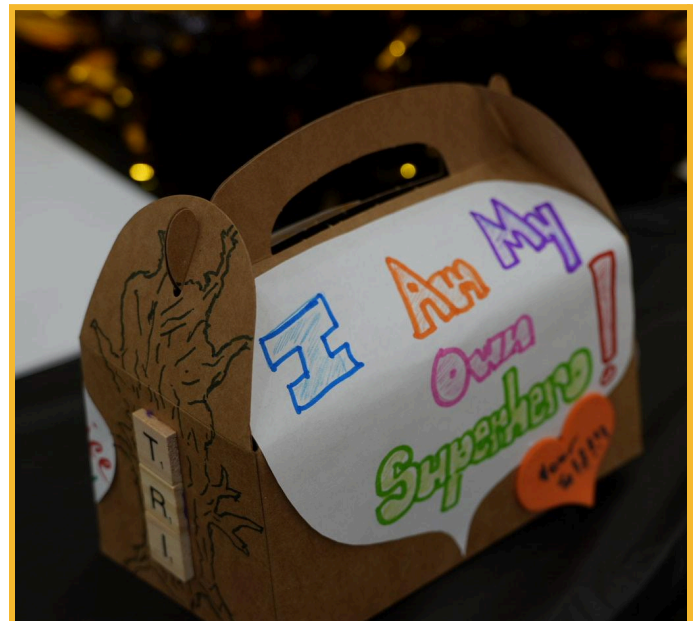
My passion for this fight has grown, and so has my understanding of the needs of my community, specifically those of our Black youth. I started out organizing in the education space with the “school choice/reform” side. I worked with charter management organizations and other supporters of the charter school movement. On my end, this work has evolved to push for educational justice for families, schools, and the public education space—period, regardless of the school model.

I began working with a group of other organizers and activists around the country and in Chicago to build what we called a *child justice campaign*, which boils down to social determinants of health. We challenged our communities and elected officials to ponder and respond to questions

like, “Do we have access to good schools? Do we have access to quality healthcare? Do we have strong economic structures in our communities? Don't we deserve these things?” In campaigning for access to these social determinants of health, we sought out other advocacy groups that were doing similar work and partnered with them to push policies and practices that promote fairness and equity in our communities.

Ultimately, I founded and currently head The Roots Initiative because I recognized a significant and urgent need to create safe spaces for, nurture, and uplift the leaders of the next generation, particularly in Black communities.

At The Roots Initiative, we believe that by investing in the holistic well-being and empowerment of Black youth, we are sowing the seeds for a more just, compassionate, and equitable society. We are engaging youth in their communities, centering them in their identity, grounding them in their purpose, and immersing them in their history. Rooted in our values of cultural and identity awareness, social-emotional wellness, and collective responsibility and power, we will bring our vision of thriving, self-determined communities actualized through youth leadership and civic engagement to fruition.



Fully knowing that change takes time, that I won't live to fight forever, and that true liberation commands grassroots power and revolutionary action, I have wholeheartedly embraced patience, purpose, and passing the torch in this newest journey of activism through youth empowerment. I am certain that this movement we're building—rooted in cultural consciousness, wellness, and radical love, and driven by brilliant youth—will help shape communities in which all of us thrive.

Working Together Towards a Common Goal

Chicago's long history of machine politics and agendas that exclude the needs and voices of marginalized groups, as well as its history of racial and socio-economic segregation, pose challenges to coalition building and change. Many of the local advocacy groups work in silos. Nowadays, with activism becoming "popular," profitable, and performative (I like to call it "*actorvism*"), the front lines have become auditions for the spotlight.

Nonetheless, it's more important now than ever that we all come together for every community regardless of differences in race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, or any other self-identifying category. We have to mobilize people who are genuinely committed and working to uplift our communities. We have to strategically develop and maintain relationships. Most importantly, we have to respect the fact that while we may not agree on certain things or have different ideas on how to get to a solution, we all have the same goal: the true liberation of marginalized communities.

Building Solidarity and Eradicating Elitism

Acknowledging intersectionality in movement building is crucial. Although I worked in the private education space for quite some time, I've recently expanded my advocacy efforts with the understanding that acts of oppression, inequality, and injustice all work hand in hand.



During the pandemic, we saw a troubling increase in carjackings and other crimes committed by school-aged youth. These young people were out of school, disengaged, and struggling with the inadequacies of distance learning. Their families, already under immense pressure, faced severe financial, mental, and emotional hardships. In many cases, especially in under-resourced Black and Brown communities, access to adequate healthcare was out of reach. Meanwhile, the victims of these injustices experienced heightened trauma and a decreased quality of life.

These circumstances illustrate the prevalence of the pre-school-to-prison pipeline and failures in policy, and they highlight gaps in healthcare, education, and economic mobility. This convergence of social issues, exacerbated by racial and socioeconomic disparities, demonstrates our interconnectedness and the urgent need to address these systemic challenges collectively.

As a Black woman from a low-income community who also identifies as LGBTQ+, I find having all of these identities and advocating across the board is critical. Black history has been under attack and erasure. The sexual identities of Black, gay historymakers like Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde, and James Baldwin have largely been footnotes in their life stories.

Black women have been historically and consistently strong—sometimes to our own sacrifice and detriment. We carry so many movements and have served as allies in so many other movements, but we've also been undermined by systemic racism and injustice in this country.

All of these identities are part of me, and it's my job to help bring voice and solidarity to these different groups.

The notion of white supremacy and elitism—that certain groups are better than others, or that certain groups are inferior and other groups are superior—is an obstacle to creating solidarity. History has conveyed a lot of white saviorship and whitewashing.

Fred Hampton is one of my heroes because he *understood the assignment*. Historically this country has tried to create the dynamic of Black against White, dividing us under racial constructs and a false notion of white supremacy. But Chairman Fred knew the power of organizing oppressed

groups regardless of color. He knew that poor white people were part of the same caste system as Black, LatinX, disabled, and LGBTQ+ people and that we would be stronger together.

Having these conversations and developing solidarity against the systems that have consistently and persistently oppressed us for so many years is vital. We need to know the history, understand the power dynamics, and come together to fight for equality, equity, and liberation.

Anyone Can Be an Activist

When people ask me why I'm in the advocacy and activism space, I always respond, "I didn't sign up for this work—I was *assigned* this work."

Activism is hard work. If you're not passionate about the cause and the people, you won't last. It's work that can kill you physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. I've known many activists who have passed away and/or have experienced state-sanctioned violence

on the front lines, including our ancestors and people my own age. You have to be really invested and committed.

I don't want to say, "If you're not invested, that's okay," because it's not okay. Everyone has the ability to be an activist or a disruptor; they just have to find their lane. At the end of the day, anyone who truly believes in equality and equity for all should be invested in this liberation fight.



A Call to Action and Liberation

How much longer will we allow ourselves to be trampled under the feet of oppression? How much longer will we turn a blind eye to hypocrisy and elitism in a country that says we're all free and equal, but in actuality we're not? How much longer will we forsake humanity and decency for hate and intolerance?

There's an urgency for action, solidarity, respect, and love in these chaotic, socially and politically divisive times. There's an urgency for us to act collectively because no one can do this by themselves, and no one group can do it alone. It's urgent that we come together now and that we fight against everything that has sought to divide, demean, and destroy us throughout the years.

The liberation of our marginalized communities is necessary and needs to happen now because it means true liberation for us all. I'm here, and I'm

unapologetically fighting for my community. And if I don't see the change I'm seeking in my lifetime, I'm committed to going down trying. ❖

Tanesha Peoples is the founder and CEO of [The Roots Initiative](#), a Black youth leadership development organization in Chicago. A Black woman who identifies as LGBTQ, Tanesha was born and raised on the southside of Chicago, where she currently lives.

The Roots Initiative's (TRI) mission is "to activate Black youth as the architects and leaders of transformative civic and social change in their communities and beyond." TRI's work includes year-round programming that fosters whole-child joy and wellness while equipping Black youth with the tools and resources to hone their leadership skills and potential, ultimately realizing a vision for thriving, self-determined communities.

Note: This essay is based upon an interview we conducted with Tanesha during the height of the pandemic. It has been significantly revised since that time.

