

A New Retail Complex Is Helping Black Women Drive Detroit's Economic Recovery

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THE OBAMA

A Development by The Platform
Story by Henner Espinoza



The redevelopment of The Obama, housed in a historic Old Redford building, is emerging as a thriving community-level ecosystem for local business owners through a public-private partnership

Built 104 years ago in Northwest Detroit’s Old Redford district and renovated in the depths of the pandemic, The Obama is already emerging as a hub for the city’s equitable economic recovery, driven by black women-owned businesses.

Redeveloped for \$3.6 million by The Platform, a real estate development company dedicated to helping rebuild the City of Detroit, the nearly 13,000-square-foot space includes eight street-level commercial storefronts, six of which are occupied, and four residential loft units set at affordable leases. All residential units, priced at 60-75% area medium income (AMI), were leased upon the building’s opening. Several businesses in the space are operated by lifelong locals, the outcome of a planning effort that engaged community members and civic leaders who form part of a Neighborhood Advisory Council (NAC) to help identify potential retail tenants, with precedence given to health and wellness focused businesses.

The effort to build a NAC, which was non-mandated according to the city’s Community Benefits Ordinance (they are required when projects cost more than \$75 million and receive subsidies), was led by The Platform.

The NAC provided more than just resources to a neighborhood that has been historically marginalized: “It puts power in the hands of the community leaders, business owners, and residents who have strived to improve this neighborhood long before The Platform renovated this building,” Myles Hamby said. Hamby, a Senior Development Manager at The Platform, was in charge of touring, qualifying and ultimately leasing all retail spaces at The Obama to prospective tenants. “I meet with the NAC monthly to ensure that we create a solid tenant mix that best serves the building and the neighborhood.” Moving forward, the NAC will decide how any excess revenue from the building is distributed for community-facing activities.

Dr. Karla Mitchell, founder and CEO of CLASS (Changing Lives and Staying Sober) and Haus of Healthy Living, runs both organizations out of a pair of storefronts at The Obama. “Visibility has always been key with my work,” she said, adding that being able to anchor herself in the community was key to her decision to set up shop there. “People can access me from a bus line, from driving by and parking, and from just walking past.”

The Obama is named for local artist Chazz Miller’s mural of Michelle and Barack Obama “First Dance”, that once hung on the building’s facade—the work is now on display in an onsite art gallery—and resulted from a public-private partnership that includes the City of Detroit, Invest Detroit, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, Horizon Bank and the Fisher Foundation.

For over a century, the building was an anchor in the neighborhood following its opening in 1917 as a Peoples State Bank branch. Old Redford, which boasts a historic downtown surrounded by early 1900s single-family homes has seen a series of booms and busts. After the bank’s closure in 1931 during the Great Depression, and the building’s short lived use as a Stein’s Department Store, the structure suffered severe deterioration during its nearly decade long vacancy.

“I saw it in all its glory, fall apart, and now I’m putting it back together,” said John J. George, founder of Detroit Blight Busters, a non-profit that has been working to revitalize Detroit neighborhoods since 1988. “I’ve been putting it back together for 33 years,” he adds.

Detroit’s Strategic Neighborhood Fund has earmarked Old Redford for community improvements—focusing on streetscape, business development, and affordable housing—following years of drugs, unemployment, and blight.

“We didn’t want our kids to think that was acceptable,” George says. “A neighborhood should be safe, secure, and nurturing.”

Those goals are top of mind, too, for Dawana Cooper, owner of DawanaFit, who was a personal trainer at a local gym before the start of the pandemic. Though she could no longer lead in-person group classes or one-on-one training sessions during lockdowns, she was committed to continue her life’s mission of “bringing health and fitness back into the community especially for women.”

Though Cooper is a veteran who was trained to deal with tough challenges, the pandemic brought new pressures that threatened to compound uncertainties among first-time business owners like her. But The Obama was designed to help smooth the way, particularly for black women entrepreneurs who typically face disproportionate barriers to entry, whether

from inadequate access to capital, mentorship or other resources. In fact, the retail spaces in The Obama were made available with fully finished conditions for this very reason. Going beyond traditional white-boxing, they featured pre-installed HVAC and electrical, and the complex also includes a common bathroom and kitchenette shared by all retail tenants. “Our investment in historic Old Redford demonstrates our commitment to supporting local entrepreneurs, providing affordable housing and creating places that benefit all Detroiters,” said Peter Cummings, The Platform’s executive chairman and CEO.

Dr. Mitchell says the NAC has proved critical to getting her set up at The Obama. Because of it, she says, organizers were “able to vet and screen people with viable business opportunities who are wanting to begin anew...and it’s giving the Old Redford neighborhood a footprint of shoppers.”

For her part, Cooper began laying the groundwork years ago but finally managed to launch her own business only when The Obama came along. After returning to Detroit following her military service, she began drawing up a business plan with the help of Motor City Match, a partnership between municipal and federal agencies that provides guidance and grant funding to new and expanding businesses.



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Dawana Cooper, owner of Dawana Fit

Early this year, Motor City Match contacted Cooper to let her know The Obama was seeking a fitness expert as a retail tenant. She amassed start-up capital through a series of crowdfunding efforts and now plans to begin offering in-person and virtual group classes along with one-on-one training at her new gym in the complex.

These community-driven planning efforts helped set Mitchell and Cooper up for success, and they are now among the five black women business owners currently operating out of The Obama.

Other first-time business owners in the building also arrived there after deciding to pivot, having discovered ways to reinvent themselves during the pandemic. Mother-son duo Annis and Rickey Glasper are the co-owners of Nissy's Fabulous Fashions and Sage's Wisdom. Annis, a former banker and creative at heart who quit her job in December 2019 to pursue her "side hustle" full time, saw a surge in her online retail sales during the

COVID-19 lockdown. The uptick was so notable that in the fall of 2021 she decided to partner with her son Rickey, "The Shoe Guru", an entry-level engineer at the City of Detroit and engineering undergraduate at Wayne State University, to open a joint storefront at The Obama.

He is just as excited to embark on this venture as his mother. "My biggest role model would be my mom," he says. "She's been doing business stuff her whole life, and seeing her business grow is inspiring."

Annis was familiar with credit score criteria and other banking requirements due to her career in financial services, but she did not qualify for any business loans. "You need to have a banker to go to bat for you," Annis said. Thankfully, between her online sales and her and Rickey's joint savings they were able to pool together enough cash to secure a storefront at The Obama.

They visualize their boutique becoming "the spot" for locals to find a curated collection of items ranging from jewelry to books, receive expert shoe advice, and serve as a hub for local artists, authors, and creatives.

A theme that has remained constant among all commercial tenants at The Obama is tenacity in the face of adversities—a trait that could come in handy as they look to build businesses in the wake of the pandemic and challenge the bleak outlook provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that reports approximately 20 percent of small businesses fail within the first two years of being open.

"The road as a business owner has been challenging, and I'm learning the ropes of what to do and what not to do," said Deja Smith, owner of Dej's Beauty Room. But she's getting the hang of it. "I've got to learn to let things happen when they do. If something doesn't happen right then and there I have to stop entering into crisis mode where I go, 'What am I going to do now?'"

The daughter of a longtime entrepreneurial father, Smith also credited her hard work and savings from operating initially out of her basement with helping position her to open her salon at The Obama, for around \$15,000 in start-up costs.

Marcia Johnson, owner of Marcia Johnson Photography, another retail tenant at The Obama, has a similar story. After the birth of her son in 2018, she found herself

constantly capturing all of his moments as a newborn and infant. Later, while playing with an old camera she found in her parents' home, it occurred to Johnson to pursue the hobby more seriously.

She found a photography mentor in one of her work colleagues and eventually began hosting photoshoots in a building owned by her family. Johnson became an immediate sensation and was booked months out from the start. Working cost-free out of a space owned by her brother helped her build up savings for the buildout of her storefront at The Obama, where she is excited to have the opportunity to take on more clients.

As an expert in family photography, Johnson is perhaps especially attuned to the ways support networks can develop across generations to help set people on the path toward running their own businesses. She recalls spending most of her childhood in a single-family, low-income household led by her mother. “[She] never complained and pushed us to do what we love, never doubting in our wildest dreams,” Johnson said.

It’s a story echoed by Mitchell, the child of addict parents whose grandmother was her lifelong hero. “I often think about what life could have been like had she not been there to stand in the gap for my childhood crises,” she says, “and who I could have become had it not been for her.”

As Johnson and Mitchell embark on their next chapters at The Obama—after years of drawing support from their own networks—they are forming a new community of black women business leaders who can serve as a launchpad for the next generation of entrepreneurs.

“This is huge to me!” Mitchell reflects, aware that her own success could be huge for Old Redford and the future of Detroit, too.




Marcia Johnson, owner of Marcia Johnson Photography



Dr. Karla Mitchell, founder and CEO of C.L.A.S.S. (Changing Lives and Staying Sober) and Haus of Healthy Living



Annis Glasper, co-owner of Nissy's Fabulous Fashions and Sage's Wisdom

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