

Business-oriented workshops and mentorship support social entrepreneurship in Watts



BACKGROUND

This case study highlights how the Watts Rising Displacement Avoidance Plan (DAP) helps entrepreneurs connect with local government officials. The goal is to advance small business development and enable local organizations and businesses to grow and flourish. The story highlights the stories of Shaqueal Adkins and Ladale Hayes, each of whom has benefited from the mentorship of Ivory Parnell-Chambeshi, the City of LA official who oversees Watts Rising implementation. For more about the DAP, see [page 49](#).

Interviews for this story were conducted in March and August of 2023.

Shaqueal Adkins, owner of Our Watts Bookshop and small business workshop participant. Photo credit: Shaqueal Adkins

SHAQUEAL ADKINS has been in Watts since she was eight years old. Now, living with her two small children, she commutes to a full-time job at a law firm in Culver City. But her dream is that she and her neighbors won't have to commute far outside of Watts — they'll be able to live and work in their own community. For now, though, the lack of local businesses makes that tough: "In terms of business, and growth and development, we are lacking in that area. It's challenging to increase foot traffic in our forgotten community," she said.

To address this dilemma in 2020, Adkins opened her own small business: [Our Watts Bookshop](#), an independent new and used bookstore. "There was a lack of small businesses in our community," she said. "As an avid reader and supporter of bookshops owned by Latina and Black women in Inglewood, Pasadena, and Altadena, it felt like Watts was left out. I always wanted to open a bookstore, so why not do it at home?"

Adkins faced challenges getting her business running, including finding a brick-and-mortar location where she could afford rent. She started a GoFundMe campaign to raise money to open and maintain a physical location. Given the precariousness of her business endeavor, a post on the Watts Rising Instagram account about the

DAP small business workshops piqued her interest. She soon attended a virtual workshop about the financial side of starting a small business, from opening a checking account, to how business loans work.

Adkins has received support and mentorship from Ivory Parnell-Chambeshi, the Director of Neighborhood Initiatives for Watts Rising within the office of LA Mayor Karen Bass. Parnell-Chambeshi, a key driver and strategist in implementing the Watts Rising DAP, has connected Adkins with different organizations and individuals that could support her business development.

For instance, she suggested that Adkins apply for the LA Cleantech Incubator (LACI) Founders' Business Accelerator, a program that supports underrepresented small business owners as they get started. She was accepted, and the program provides her with paid training on how to

"[Watts Rising] has lifted me up in a way that I didn't think was possible. Because of their interactions, influence, and collaboration with organizations across LA, I have all these people that are like, 'Miss Shaqueal, how can we help you today?'"

SHAQUEAL ADKINS

run and maintain her business. “Ms. Ivory and Watts Rising would reach out to me like, ‘I think you should partner with this organization to further your plans,’ ‘I think you should reach out and apply for LACI.’ They were on top of it. They were very much involved in lifting me to the next step.”

Adkins sees her bookstore becoming a hub for the community to come together. “Outside of religious organizations,

we don’t have a place where you can go and sit down, have a cup of coffee, read a book, buy a book, engage in fellowship. I feel like Our Watts Bookshop is going to bring that back home. I’m making it a mission. When I open a physical location, we’re hiring people within the community. When we open up, I want home girl from up the street to come walk to her job and get like 20 some dollars an hour. You can work in your community and make a livable wage.”

LADALE HAYES has been connected with Watts for decades: he lived in the community as a child, then later worked as a crew supervisor for North East Trees on urban forestry in Watts (see page __). Now, Hayes is in the process of starting a nonprofit designed to promote careers in wildland firefighting and urban forestry for Watts residents. Like Adkins, he is getting support in the process from Ivory Parnell-Chambeshi. “Ms. Ivory is a champion,” he said. “She has really helped me out. I love picking her brain. I probably wouldn’t be where I am right now if it wasn’t for her.”

Hayes first began his career in forestry as an incarcerated wildland firefighter. In 2007, after several years of imprisonment, he was transferred to a so-called “fire camp,” where incarcerated individuals are trained to fight wildfires. It was then that Hayes became inspired to start his nonprofit, [Operation Flame](#), and he started planning while still incarcerated. “I didn’t want to wait till I was eligible to be released to start putting my life together, so I worked on things mentally before I left,” he explained.

Hayes saw potential for his new organization to support career development for young people in his community, while also opening a door for more Latino and Black individuals to join the U.S. Forest Service. “I wanted to be of assistance to the younger generation and help provide job creation in a field where we’re lacking Black and Brown employees in the Forest Service,” he said. “There’s not too much recruiting for any wildland firefighter positions in the City of Los Angeles. So how can we get involved? It takes some of us who’ve actually been there to help others get involved.”

After his release, Hayes spent three years working with North East Trees while simultaneously advancing the goals of Operation Flame. It was through this connection to Watts Rising and North East Trees that Hayes met Parnell-Chambeshi and gained access to her mentorship and other resources associ-



Ladale Hayes, founder of Operation Flame, planting new tree cover in Watts. Photo credit: Harvard School of Public Health

ated with the DAP. Through this network, Hayes obtained an opportunity for Operation Flame to provide wildland firefighting workforce training through the City of Los Angeles.

“Without funding, we really can’t do too much. The city and North East Trees did take a chance with us — they believed in us. I hope with the seed funding from the City of LA, other funders can also get involved.”

LADALE HAYES

Now, the organization is nearly ready to start with its first three cohorts of trainees. During the two-month program, participants will develop knowledge and skills essential to firefighting and forestry careers, earning seven different certifications, plus a stipend of approximately \$4,000. “We have all the basics covered — way more beyond the requirements to be hired as a wildland firefighter for the Forest Service or other wildland firefighting agencies,” he said.