

Seeds of reparation

Community activist Melvin Giles works to promote peace through his gardening and peace bubbles.

By Soraya Keiser

Melvin Giles tells angry people to put their hands in dirt because the dirt can calm them down. Washed away, shoveled away, thrown away dirt. Because dirt is Giles' lifeblood. Without dirt Giles would not have tended his family garden as a child, growing collard greens and peppers and tomatoes until it became a hobby and not just a chore. Without dirt Giles would not have remained as connected with his neighbors whom he bugged until they would install a box garden in their backyards. Without dirt Giles would not have started the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance, bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to the Rondo community in St. Paul starved of green. Without dirt Giles would not have begun planting the seeds of reparation.

Giles and his family – mom, dad and three older brothers – moved to the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul, now known as the Frogtown and Summit-University neighborhoods, in the late '60s, just as Interstate 94 was being completed. At the time, I-94 wasn't a sign of racial discrimination to Giles. It was a winter playground.

Vivian Mims, Giles' long-time friend and neighbor, recalls sledding and playing "King of the Hill" on mounds of dirt covered in snow left on the highway to await the thaw that meant continued construction.

Every thaw also meant gardening. Giles' dad, Reverend Robert Giles, was an avid gardener, and gardening was a requirement for the Giles sons. After Giles' mom died when he was 12, gardening became father-son time, and Giles learned to love tending the shoots and weeding the rows.

Another neighborhood activity was always football. Football on the blacktop of Wilson Junior High. Football

in the side yard. Football on Aurora Street. Football as a running back and defensive back for Central High School. Football. Football. Football. Sometimes Giles and his friends would pretend to be Alan Page, one of the Vikings' defensive line of dirt-smearred "Purple People Eaters" who eventually became the first Black man to serve on the Minnesota Supreme Court. Or Bobby Hayes of the Dallas Cowboys, a black man and the only person to win both an Olympic gold medal and a Super Bowl ring. Two people who showed Giles that success was possible for people who looked like him.

"For a Black kid, that meant something without even knowing that it meant something," Giles said.

Driving through a Chicago suburb on the way home from a funeral with his brother Metric, Giles was stopped by the police and told that he and Metric looked like the suspects of a robbery. Soon six police cars were surrounding Giles' blue Chevy Nova SS. Every piece of luggage was searched, but all the police found were the Giles' dress clothes from the funeral. That didn't stop the police from escorting the brothers to the convenience store they had supposedly robbed, searching their luggage once more and finally letting them go after the owner said it wasn't them.

Driving with his brothers, Giles has been stopped countless times by the police. Oftentimes officers didn't explain why.

Giles has lost count of the number of times a gun has been pointed at his face.

Giles started off college studying economics and history at Clark University in Atlanta, Georgia. — a breath of fresh air from St. Paul. Dubbed a "Chocolate City," Giles became part of a Black community unlike any he had experienced before.

Giles watches as urban gardeners pick beets at Live Organically. |
Photo By Soraya Keiser



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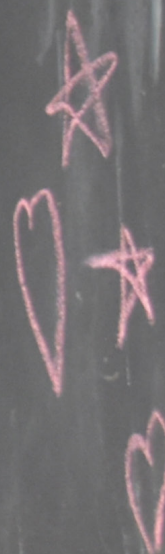
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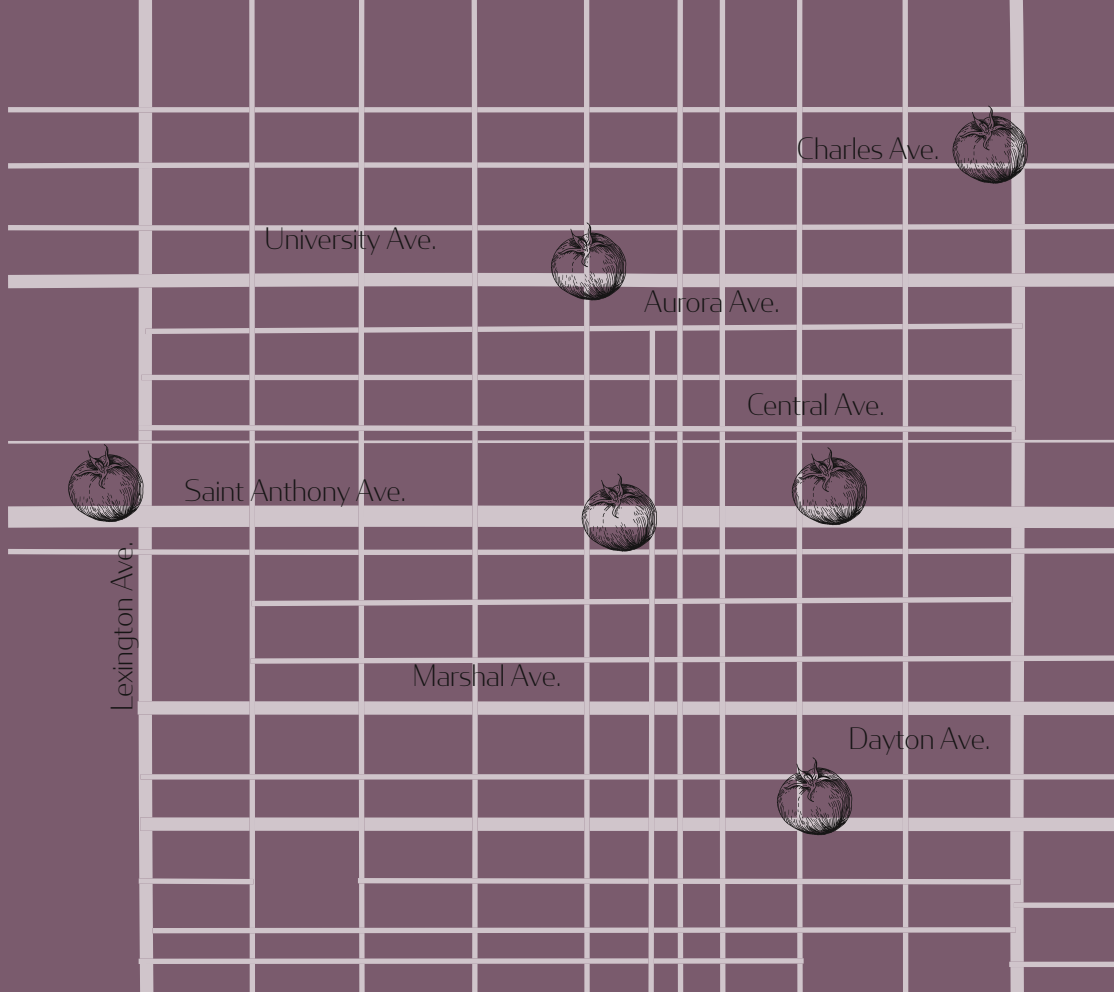
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GARDEN



The Aurora St. Anthony Peace Garden is a welcoming place for the Rondo neighborhood. Community members can come to the garden to harvest fruits and vegetables, rest on the benches or participate in Urban Farm and Garden Alliance events. | Photo by Rachel Blood





Map of the community gardens in the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance.

"The first thing on my mind wasn't that I was Black," Giles said.

Realizing that he was having too much fun and might not be able to graduate on time, Giles transferred to Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for his last two years. He switched his majors to community development and criminal justice, both of which he uses now.

If Atlanta were a breath of fresh air, Sioux Falls was the stuffiest room Giles had ever walked into.

A few months into his first semester, Giles sent some photos home to his dad. With the photos he wrote, "I'm using color film, but everything here is black and white."

In an economics class Giles received an F on a paper where he argued that America used the slave trade to boost capitalism. He almost got expelled from the institution after sharing the idea that race plus abusive power equals racism in a sociology class.

One night three white men showed up at Giles' apartment door and told him to get out of the neighborhood. He was determined to make Sioux Falls a more welcoming place for people of color, so he didn't stand down. He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty.

A few years later, Giles returned home when his dad got sick. Interested in community development, he got involved with Catholic Charities, which at the time had a Frogtown neighborhood location on the corner of

University and Dale. He took care of the family garden when his dad couldn't.

Despite working for a charity, Giles was told by his Catholic Charities administrator to focus more on uplifting the community.

"He gave me instructions not to do charitable work," Giles said. "He gave me instructions to do empowerment work."

This means Giles doesn't want to give vegetables to his neighbors — he wants them to actively participate in growing their own. He doesn't want to show off the peace pole in his side yard — he wants people to have their own. He doesn't want to blow bubbles to ease tense meetings — he wants people to blow their own.

Through his work at Catholic Charities, Giles got involved in the Bethel/Frogtown and Summit-University Community Partnership. He attends Partnership Advisory Committee meetings and currently works closely with Tanden Brekke, Assistant Director of Community Engagement at Bethel University. Giles not only has been the most consistent attendee of PAC meetings for the past 22 years, but he has constantly been inviting community members to attend and become involved.

"Melvin is that connector," Brekke said. "On an ongoing basis he is a positive voice for the Partnership in the community."

He continues to be a community organizer through the Partnership and helped start the Urban Farm and Garden Alliance in 2014. Still the co-facilitator of the UFGA, Giles collaborates with community gardens and backyard box gardeners to promote reconciliation, peace and justice through the growing and sharing of food in the FSU communities.

This means Giles has hosted garlic plantings, peace celebrations and garden clean-up parties. He has toured organic farms, spoken in social work classes at Bethel University and worked with the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities chapter of Engineers Without Borders USA to install a rainwater catchment system in the Aurora St. Anthony Peace Garden.

He also helped to garner support and funds to build a land bridge across I-94 — a project championed by ReConnect Rondo, a local organization. The vision is to have a large park built over the highway that allows the neighborhood to become one again. Many community members hope for the bridge to include greenhouses, a walking path and an outdoor theater. Giles also wants a lazy river in the land bridge.

"It will help people relax," he said. "It will help people to breathe. It will help people just to be."

Grounded in racial and environmental justice, he thinks the land bridge would heal the concrete scar



that cuts through Rondo and has displaced more than 500 homes and 300 businesses.

The work means moving a lot of dirt.

Giles mostly desires peace in his community. For him, peace comes in the form of bubbles. Of little balls of soap that shimmer in the light of an angry meeting. Of a hand reaching out to pop each one. Something that brings peoples' attention away from their grievances and to the beauty of bubbles.

"I prefer bubbles instead of bullets," Giles said.

Giles uses his bubbles when co-facilitating with Diane Dodge the Reconciliation Lunch Group, an open forum that meets monthly to discuss a variety of topics relevant to the community. When moments regarding the construction of the Light Rail, neighborhood politics, the murder of Philando Castile, I-94 or the murder of George Floyd have gotten heated, he has stood up and started blowing bubbles into the air.

"It has helped break the tension for a moment," Brekke

said. "Not to distract or avoid, but to loosen us all up to go back to the topic."

Giles always has a bottle nearby for easy blowing. In his coat pocket, in his backpack, sometimes on a string around his neck. Giles' bubbles have become his trademarked metaphor, so much so that he even leans into his nickname Peace Bubbles.

Peace is bubbles. Peace is community. Peace is dirt.

Giles knows the beauty of dirt and the things that come from it. He knows that if dirt can bring a grieving father and son together, it can bring a grieving community together. He knows that getting kids involved in community gardens helps them along the trajectory of a healthy lifestyle. He knows that green spaces can bring joy to a community ravaged by redlining and the creation of I-94. He knows that dirt is healing.

Designed By: Joy Sporleder

Melvin Giles has a Sankofa bird painted on the side of his garage. The symbol of the Sankofa bird originates from Ghana and reminds people that they must go back to their roots in order to move forward. | *Photo by Rachel Blood*