STEP BY STEP,
CARRYING THE
LEGACY OF THE
CIVIL RIGHTS
MOVEMENT
FORWARD

Impact Report 2021-2024





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A Letter from Our CEO

To our dedicated community, partners and supporters,

I'm extremely proud to share our first impact report! Three years ago, Ms. Jo Ann Bland and I took on her long-standing dream to memorialize the historic significance of Selma and the activists who, in the 1960s, organized and ultimately changed the course of American history – and we made it a reality by starting Foot Soldiers Park.

We grew up in Selma. We know the people, businesses, politics, neighborhoods and challenges here. Spanning two generations of Black people, we are both defined by years of everyday living, joys, traumas, interactions with the powers that be, and unbreakable self-determination. Our experiences and decades of knowledge and community wisdom have shaped the vision for Foot Soldiers Park, a community-based nonprofit dedicated to preserving our city's legacy while at the same time, in partnership with our neighbors and families, we're creating something new, bold, and transformational.

We are well on our way to executing our plans, thanks to the generous financial support and commitment of funders, individual donors and community partners.

- We're laying the essential groundwork for building a better future for our community by building a robust organizational infrastructure, including opening new offices, expanding our capacity as a team, and implementing an ambitious 10-year strategic plan to guide our work and mission.
- We're building out our historic preservation efforts to drive economic development and revenue to Selma, including renovating the historic Selma Times-Journal building, purchasing property to redevelop, and expanding our educational tour operation.
- We're cultivating the new generation of civil rights activists in Selma and nationally, through our local recruitment, civic engagement training, get-

out-the-vote programs and the preparation of our National Youth Advisory Board to develop and execute a future forward national agenda.

We've completed landscape and architectural designs for the Foot Soldiers Park & Education Center – our future campus of historic and new buildings which will follow the path civil rights activists took in 1965 and provide immersive experiences that cut across all areas of the organization's work. It will represent the biggest investment in Selma to date, serving a central role to achieving our mission of transformation.

As I reflect on the last few years and look ahead, I am humbled by the fact that every bit of this work is a testament to the extraordinary power of everyday people fighting for justice and defining the true meaning of the word democracy. As leaders, we wholeheartedly believe that the community itself must drive meaningful and lasting positive change. Plenty of nonprofits and advocates say that's how they operate, but actually executing on it and delivering programs and services that reflect that—as we do daily in Selma—is rare.

Within the pages of this report, you will find the stories of ordinary individuals who, through Foot Soldiers Park, have identified their purpose in the fight for social justice, applied their creative thinking to shape our organization's present, and define where we want to go in the future. You will get an inside look at our commitment to always listen to people's needs and create spaces for fresh ideas, and how that approach has led to our ability to grow, learn and innovate.

The generosity and unwavering support of our donors, funders and partners is the fuel for our determination and the foundation for how we can achieve success. I'm grateful for your commitment to march alongside us as we build this new future.

Selma forward, **Kimberly Smitherman**, Founding CEO



A Message from Our Board Chair

Dear Friends of Foot Soldiers Park,

As we approach the 60th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery marches, we're reminded that the fight for racial justice continues, our freedoms are interconnected, and collective action is needed to achieve true liberation for all.

Many Americans don't know the story of Selma – how we have all benefited from the sacrifices made by its residents that eventually lead to the passage of the <u>Voting Rights Act of 1965</u>. Yet – it's a story that belongs to all of us.

Today, Selma still struggles with stark racial disparities, opportunities for growth are extremely limited, and the legacy of Jim Crow practices continues to rear its ugly head. The truth is democracy will not be fully realized in our country until the people in places like Selma actually can truly thrive and freely pursue their dreams, unhampered by ongoing barriers to basic human needs, individual progress and self-determination.

Foot Soldiers Park is well-positioned to meet this moment and help Selma define what an equitable and just future looks like, and how we achieve it. I'm proud of the impact we've achieved so far and the bold goals we have set to preserve history, fuel the economy by providing unique cultural and historic experiences, and provide programming and spaces for youth where they can learn, dream and lead with a sense of pride and confidence.

As we look ahead, I'm inspired by the team's determination and the continuous support of the community, our funders, donors and partners who have joined us on this journey to build a vibrant community hub and cultural sanctuary in Selma where leaders, activists, visitors, residents and youth can collaborate, share ideas and thrive.

Sincerely,

Donovan Duncan. Board Chair

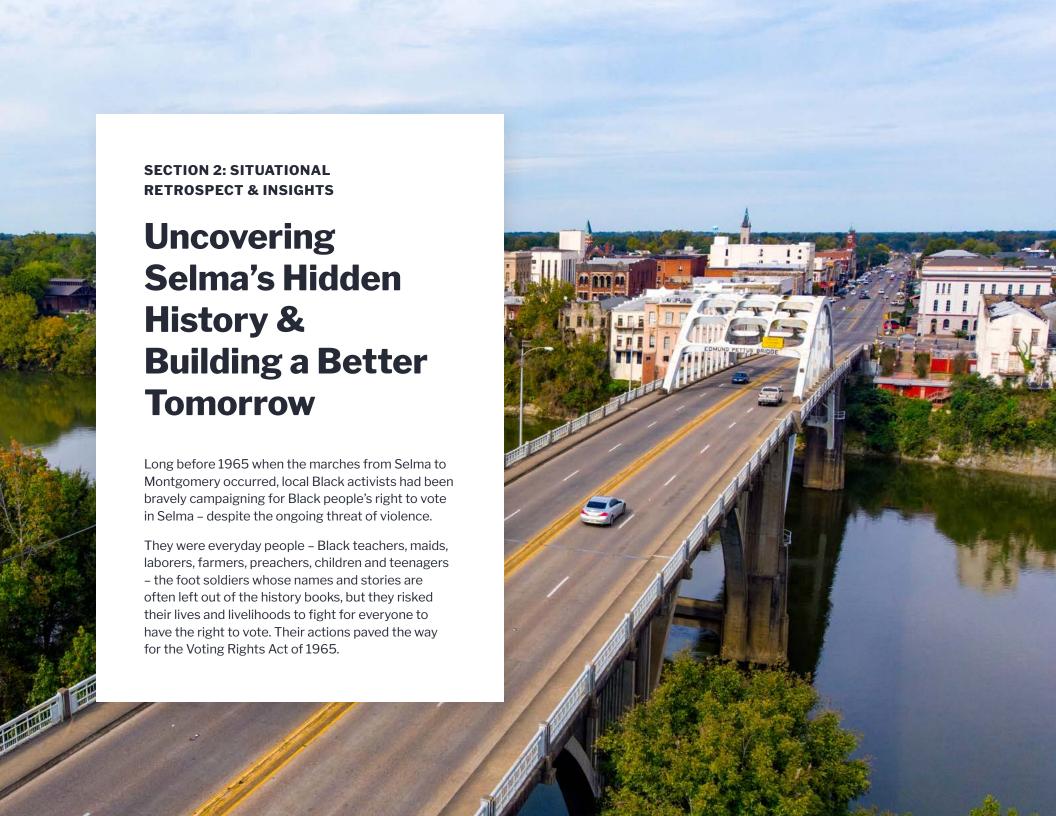
Our Mission

Foot Soldiers Park is on a mission to preserve and memorialize the pivotal role that Selma and its residents played in American history, bring economic and cultural revitalization to the community and its residents, and prepare the next generation of activists to continue the fight against racial injustice and voter suppression.





Foot Soldiers Park aims to improve the wellbeing of Selma's underserved residents by bringing economic opportunities to the city and developing amenities, resources, and programs that benefit the community.



Despite Selma's pivotal role in American democracy, the city has been left behind economically and politically, and faces deeprooted challenges.

POVERTY:

41%

live below the poverty line

FOOD INSECURITY:

30%

suffer from food insecurity

LOW EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT:

20%

have earned a Bachelor's degree or higher

LOW INCOMES:

\$27k

is the average income in the city

Selma's rich legacy presents a powerful opportunity to transform Selma into a cultural, historic and economic beacon for hope and a place for liberation and prosperity. Foot Soldiers Park aims to:

- Honor the legacy of the foot soldiers: Ensuring their sacrifices are remembered and their stories are shared.
- Channel their spirit of activism: Inspiring a new generation to fight for justice and equality.
- **Educate and empower:** Providing residents and visitors with the knowledge and tools to become agents of change.
- Fuel economic growth: Leveraging Selma's history to create a thriving and sustainable economy.

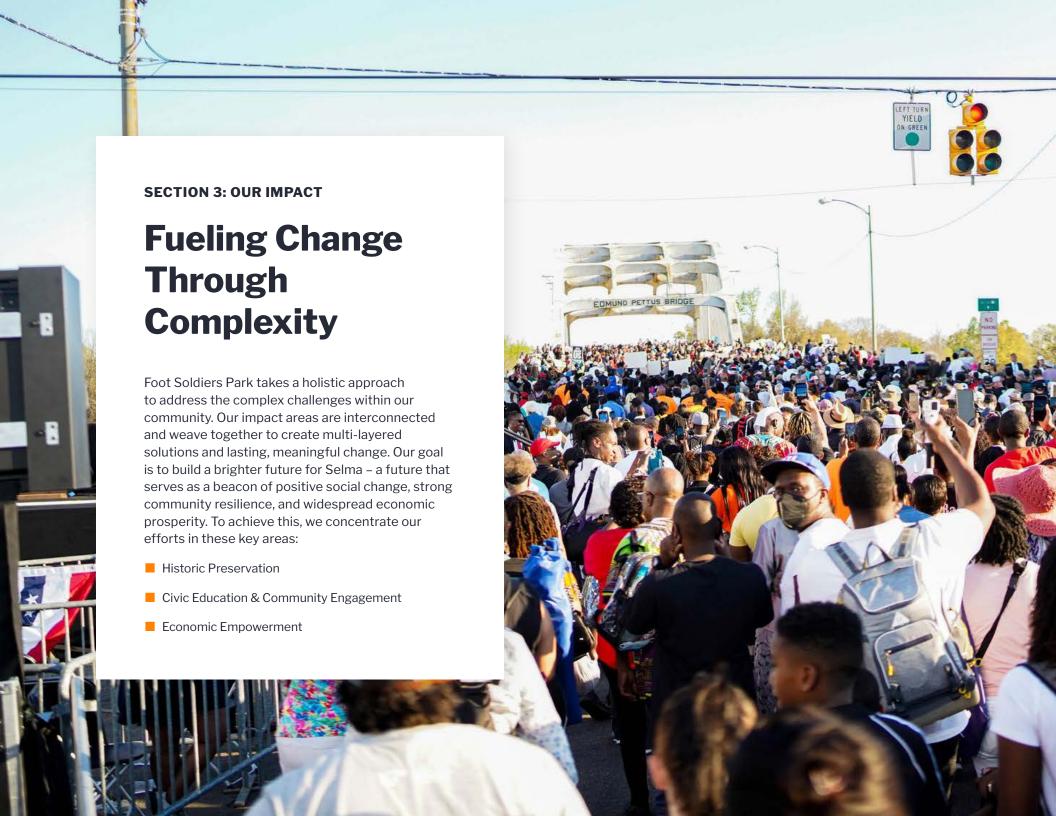
At Foot Soldiers Park, we are united by a clear purpose – to preserve the civil rights legacy of the past, to address the ongoing challenges of the present, and do the work to set Selma on a path to a better future.

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With the formation of Foot Soldiers Park, Selma will start to grow. The empty buildings will be filled, so that they can attract the tourists. There's no sense in thousands coming to walk the bridge each day, and they get in the car and go back to Montgomery. That's ridiculous. We have them here, so we're gonna have to find a way to keep them here.

Jo Ann Bland, Founder





Historic Preservation Highlights

At the core of Foot Soldiers Park's work is preserving the stories of the unsung civil rights heroes and commemorating the places where they gathered and strategized. We work to elevate their legacy in Selma and beyond, and empower the community to use its history as a catalyst for liberation, economic growth, and racial justice.

Transforming our historic tours into a force for economic growth and racial justice

Our Journeys for the Soul tours bring Selma's history to life through the voices of those who lived it. Tourists can walk in the footsteps of the original foot soldiers alongside Ms. Bland, who shares her firsthand account of the 1965 marches and the plight of Black people. The tour provides a 3-hour memorable journey – connecting powerful stories with the sites where history unfolded, including the cages where slaves were held upon their arrival centuries ago, the local chapel where Black people were forbidden from entering through the front door – despite it being their own church – and of course, the walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

The tours attract a wide range of visitors, from student groups to university scholars, members of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), corporate and philanthropic teams, and even professional athletes like the NFL's Seattle Seahawks and NBA's Los Angeles Lakers. Most recently, 100 U.S. federal judges experienced our tour, learning about the historical context of voting rights and the human cost of voter suppression.

To deepen the experience, we've expanded our team of guides to include foot soldiers Lynda Lowery and Barbara Barge, adding their unique perspectives to our program. Beyond the guided tours, we will produce of a new series of engaging, self-guided audio tours featuring recordings from our team and immersive experiences to make Selma's story accessible to anyone around the world.

Learn more about the history of Selma



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That's so powerful when you leave a space believing that you can make a difference.

Our students who have [taken] the trip...
they're more likely to vote. They're more likely to do service, more likely to be civically engaged, more likely to engage in protests or calling campaigns and writing campaigns — the kinds of things that make change.

Jodi Thiesing-Ritter, FSP Board Member and Director of University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Civil Rights Pilgrimage program which includes Ms. Bland's tour

Echoing the 60s: Ordinary people making extraordinary impact

During her tours, Ms. Bland shares her memories and tells emotional stories of the power of her family, friends and neighbors as they participated in the Selma to Montgomery marches and every other aspect of the civil rights movement that led to those pivotal protests.

There was the "Courageous Eight" – eight brave educators, ministers, war veterans, businesspeople and a barber – who quietly organized the strong base of Selma activists. Nearly every teacher in the city, in an act of unprecedented defiance, leveraged their esteemed position and united to register to vote, risking their careers to demonstrate the profound importance of civic engagement. There were also school children, some as young as 9-years-old, who organized their own protests when many adults were facing intimidation and mass arrests.

Ms. Bland's stories connect the challenges of the past to the ongoing inequities in Selma today, calling on visitors to carry the torch of social and racial justice forward in their own communities and to embrace the active role everyone can play in the ongoing fight for a more just, more compassionate, and equitable society.

Learn more about the history of the Selma movement

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This history is so powerful. It was so transformational for me, personally, and it sends the message that everyday folks can make big changes.

Jodi Thiesing-Ritter, FSP Board Member and Director of University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Civil Rights Pilgrimage program which includes Ms. Bland's tour

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For over 15 years I have been bringing over 1,000 people a year to Selma to be impacted by Jo Anne Bland. She brings those turbulent times to life and her story cuts right to the heart of the listener and makes them understand the struggle these brave Americans endured for freedom and moving our country forward. It is always a highlight for the participants of the trips I run.

Bill Planer, Etgar 36 Civil Rights Journey



Civic Education & Community Engagement Highlights

We believe that the most powerful solutions to the challenges our communities face will come from people with lived experiences. As part of our approach, we actively engage the community through ongoing dialogue and provide them with tools, resources and civic education so they can make informed decisions and contribute their own voices and perspectives in the making of positive and sustainable change for generations to come.

Rising to the challenge of widespread disenfranchisement

For years, voter turnout rates in Selma have been on the decline due to multiple factors, including voter suppression, redistricting, gerrymandering and population decline. In the 2020 election, just under 57% of voters showed up at the polls showing real signs of voter apathy – a result of collective exhaustion and loss of faith in the current political system.

Creating new opportunities for voter engagement and reversing this downturn requires better strategies and long-term commitment. At Foot Soldiers Park, we are taking a big-picture approach for sustainable impact, engaging community members in a year-round programmatic exploration of civic responsibilities to develop a cadre of self-motivated activists who can be mobilized to educate other residents in their own communities and increase Selma's voter turnout.

In the lead-up to 2024's historic election, along with our staff, 20 of our activated residents accomplished the following:

5,000+

cards with QR codes distributed for people to register to vote online 10,480

phone calls made to potential voters

2,743+

hours logged in training, phonebanking, canvassing, community billboarding and hosting special events 4

voter registration block parties organized in Selma's voting districts

100%

of Selma's high schools visited to register 18-yearold students to vote

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The Selma movement, like most movements, was primarily fought by women and children. [Children] don't realize that they have the same power as we had. So when they come [to Selma for my tour], I want them to know that when they leave that they are just as strong as we are, so I tell them those stories of the youth.

Jo Ann Bland, "The Soul of America" documentary

Building the bench of the next generation of civil rights activists

Foot Soldiers Park believes that young people are key to the success of the civil rights and racial justice movement. Throughout history, the passion of youth has propelled movements forward, and just like our own founder Ms. Bland was activated at a very young age in the 60's, today we aim to recruit and activate the young leaders of tomorrow by training them in civic responsibility and creating space for them to discover their own forms of leadership.

In 2021, we launched the National Youth Advisory Board (YAB) to inform our work with youth, inform our programmatic design, and set the foundation for a robust national youth platform for civic engagement, peer learning, organizing, and leadership development. Our goal is to transform Selma into a hub for developing young activists who are armed with the lessons from the past and all the tools, knowledge, and resources needed to serve as the next generation of strategic racial justice leaders. Only when we actively listen and invest in youth can we develop authentic experiences and provide access to resources that can serve the needs of young people nationally and prepare them to succeed as civic and political leaders.

A standout activist from our Youth Advisory Board is 18-year-old Micah Thomas. He was this year's YAB Vice President whose bold dreams include one day in the not so distant future becoming the President of the United States of America.

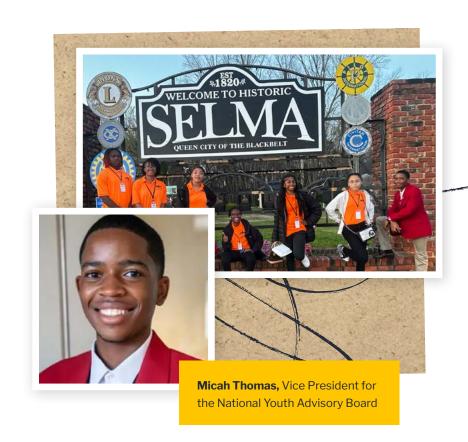
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I always say, my plan isn't to make America great again, but I'll lead America to a great point where everyone has the rights and freedoms that we all deserve.

Micah Thomas, Vice President for the National Youth Advisory Board

His career plans stem from his two years of experience as part of this year's cohort of a select group of 20 young people from across the country. YAB provides members with a comprehensive education on civil rights history, organizing and social movements, building a strong network, social justice, and advocacy. The group is also immersed in the civic ecosystem, providing an inside look at the institutions and careers affecting societal change, including law schools and legal advocates, the Alabama state house and the US Capitol, and lawmakers and legislative advocates.

Read more about Micah's story





The children today have managed to harness the media... I mean to look at those kids out there trying to do what's right and saying they're not gonna take it anymore, brought back the memories of the '60s... [I pray that] those children don't stop. Don't stop 'til they get it right. The methods that we used in the '60s, I really don't think would work for them today. I really don't. But they need to know where we've been as a nation so that they can take us where we need to be.

Jo Ann Bland, Ms. Magazine, Aug. 8, 2020

Economic Empowerment Highlights

We believe communities thrive when they have the resources and power to shape their own destiny. That's why we foster key partnerships and facilitate relationships with local government, financial institutions, and funders, opening doors to quality jobs, entrepreneurship opportunities, and resources that boost incomes and fuel economic mobility for Selma residents.



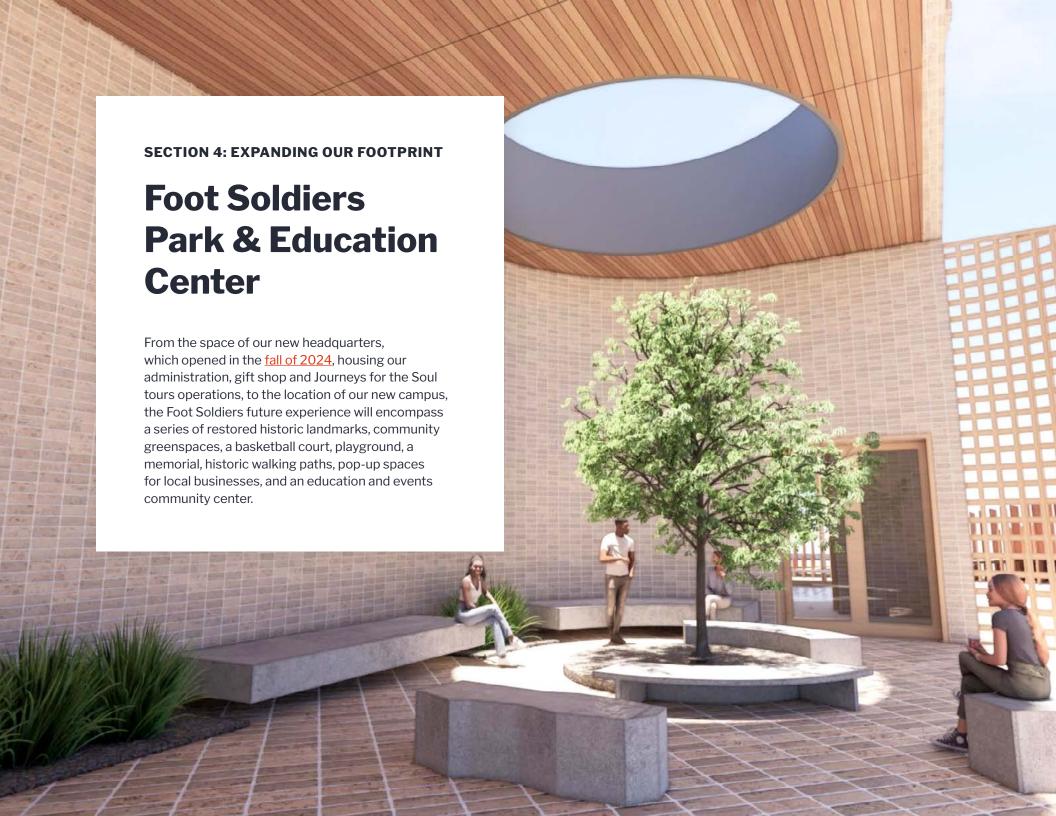
Breathing new life into Selma's downtown: A \$4 million transformation

In the last few years, Foot Soldiers Park, in partnership with Seattle-based nonprofit Common Power and developers Heyday Holdings, has revitalized the historic *Selma Times-Journal* building which sits at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, one of the busiest and most significant corners of downtown Selma. This \$4 million renovation project has transformed the 1870s structure into a vibrant mixed-use development, housing our new headquarters for our tours, a local coffee shop, and rental space for residents.

For years, Selma's downtown has been marked by boarded-up and abandoned buildings, offering little to no amenities. The lack of infrastructure in Selma has stymied the city's ability to leverage the hundreds of thousands people who visit the Edmund Pettus Bridge and nearby Montgomery Legacy Sites yearly. Many visitors fly into Montgomery, 45 minutes away, and return there for hotel accommodations due to limited options in Selma. Steve Romein and Ty Cramer, the owners of Heyday Holdings, worked with Common Power to buy, renovate and expand the historic *Times-Journal* building. Through Ms. Bland's tour, Romein and Cramer learned the story of the Selma civil rights movement, its importance to voting rights and the city's high potential for economic growth, which inspired them to commit to the project as a sign of appreciation and commitment to Ms. Bland's legacy and vision for the future. Romein told the Selma Times-Journal, "If we're going to do something that can help and make an impact in Selma, this is such a visible corner, so we were just thrilled the opportunity came up." The renovation of the Selma Times-Journal is aligned with our mission and efforts to develop new business and cultural corridors along the different routes of the Selma marches bridging the past with the present and future.

Read more about our new headquarters

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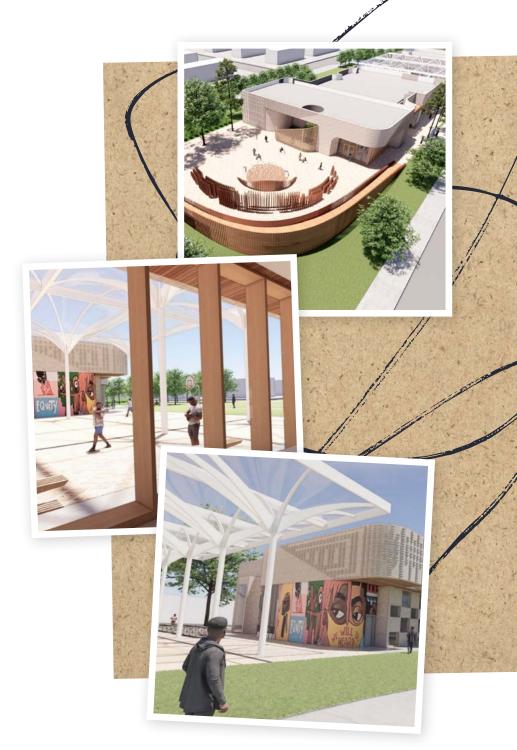
Designing a center for excellence, knowledge and community building

In the coming years we're embarking on a bold vision – to build the Foot Soldiers Park & Education Center where community members and visitors can follow the path civil rights activists took in 1965 and immerse themselves in a variety of experiences and activities that cut across all areas of the organization's work. Designed with and for the Selma community, this new complex of historic and new buildings will represent the biggest investment in Selma to date, serving a central role to achieving our mission of bold, sustainable transformation.

In 2021, with the generous support of donors and funders, our organization purchased eight former residential parcels of property – the block located on Selma Avenue between MLK and St. Ann's Streets – next to George Washington Carver (GWC) homes, the makeshift home base of foot soldiers in 1965. As soon as the properties were purchased, we set up the largely paved site to function as a new community destination with a basketball court and powerful mural, memorializing and visualizing our bold vision for the future of our community. Although all current facilities at the site are temporary, they have already become a community landmark and a space for our George Washington Carver neighbors.

Through creative participatory design meetings, including listening and visioning sessions, community members were invited to share their vision for the campus, informing the creative approach of the design team and the overall spatial and visual flow of the space. The following major components of the complex will play a key functional and communal role and include:

- Foot Soldiers Memorial
- The Selma Community Hub
- John R. Lewis Memorial Playground









Where history and hope take root

In addition to memorializing the physical space where the original foot soldiers walked in 1965, Foot Soldiers Park envisions a revitalized Selma where history and community well-being go hand-in-hand. We are committed to improving the environment where the complex will be built. Access to green spaces is vital to residents' mental, physical and ecological health, and we aim to address the current inequitable distribution.

Foot Soldiers Park is preserving the trees which lined the routes of the iconic marches from Selma to Montgomery. While many of the trees along the route were planted after 1965, the Foot Soldiers Park site holds a unique distinction: a grove of trees that existed in March of 1965 remains today. These "witness trees" will create a natural frame between the new campus and memorial, connecting our past, present, and future.

To honor this legacy and create new opportunities, we will also plant a new set of longleaf pine trees, a local native species with a long history in Alabama. The longleaf pines are currently endangered. The forests once covered vast expanses of the state, and played a key role in the growth and development of the early U.S. economy. Enslaved Black people harvested turpentine from the pines and cut the forests for lumber. The lumber, also known as the "King's Wood" because of its strength and durability, was used for building large homes in the South and was in high demand across the Northeast for multiple purposes, including flooring, house paneling and bridges. With an eye toward sustainability, Foot Soldiers Park aims to establish a longleaf pine nursery to:

- **Restore forests:** Helping combat climate change
- **Create jobs:** Selling seedlings for reforestation
- **Generate revenue:** Producing pine straw mulch

Learn more about our plans for the longleaf pine trees



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LOOKING AHEAD:

A Message from Our Founder

Dear Friends and Supporters,

My dream for Foot Soldiers Park has always been unapologetically bold and ambitious. As I look back on the last few years, I'm proud of how far we've come in such a short period of time and I'm even more convinced that despite everything that is happening in our country and around the world, with the collective power of our community, the dedication of our staff and the commitment of our supporters, our future is bright and full of limitless possibilities.

Together, we are building a sanctuary that will honor the courage and sacrifice of those who marched fearlessly for our civil rights and made voting possible for all, regardless of race. We're planting the seeds and taking the steps to build a cutting-edge hub for innovation, healing and education. We are envisioning and securing the funds for Selma's first ever community and education center. Ensuring that history is preserved with a treasure trove of archival materials, recorded oral histories and access to scholarly resources. Our new center will serve as a beacon for leaders, students and educators, empowering them to delve into the rich tapestry of Selma's Civil Rights Movement and giving them a platform to contribute to the ongoing scholarship in this critical field.

Together with our partners, supporters and community members, we are creating a space where young minds will be ignited with the spirit of activism, and where the lessons of the past will illuminate their path towards a more just and equitable future. Through innovative digital platforms, experiential exhibits and engaging educational programs, we will share the stories of the original foot soldiers and inspire new generations to envision, support and activate their own civic and political leadership.

And by doing all of this, we are laying the groundwork for a new, sustainable economic engine in Selma that builds wealth for everyone who dares to dream and reject the status quo. We see our city becoming a major tourism destination that draws and can accommodate visitors from around the world as they learn about our town's pivotal role in American history. This new influx of tourism will generate revenue for local businesses, create jobs, and stimulate economic activity not just at our sites, but throughout the whole city.

The journey I started almost sixty years ago and am still leading today as a founder of Foot Soldiers Park, continues to be one of resilience and dedication to the legacy of Selma's civil rights movement. Most importantly, the journey I invite you to join is one of hope and an unwavering commitment to the Selma community that continues to be at the heart of struggle, leading the monumental progress needed not just for the future of Black people, but for our entire country.

With your continued partnership and support, I'm confident that the future of Foot Soldiers Park and my beloved Selma is bright – as a catalyst for youth leadership, cross-generational wealth, and transformative change.

Thank you for joining me on this extraordinary journey to forge our future footprint.

Jo Ann BlandChief Strategy Officer & Founder



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Staff



Jo Ann BlandFounder and Chief Strategy Officer



Kimberly SmithermanFounding Partner and CEO



Angela BenjaminPrograms Manager



Jasmyn Bowie
Tour Coordinator



Carey M. FountainPrograms Director



Kennedy SmithermanProgram Coordinator



James Sutton
Director of Operations



My vision for the future is we right the wrongs of our past, but also ensure that we create an opportunity where every individual who calls Selma home is able to benefit from the economic development opportunities created by Foot Soldiers Park.

Donovan Duncan, Board Chair

Board Of Directors



Donovan Duncan Board Chair



Jodi Thiesing-Ritter Board Secretary



Loki Mulholland Board Treasurer



Gbenga Akinnagbe



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Joyce O'Neal



Sheyann Webb

Our Funders & Partners





























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Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part.

Congressman John Lewis, Across that Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America



To learn more about Foot Soldiers Park and how you can become a supporter visit: FootSoldiersPark.org

