

# LEVERAGING BLACK DOLLARS FOR BLACK POWER: A Conversation with Greg McKenzie and Ross Harris

**shakara tyler:** Let's start by you both telling me about who you are and what you do.

**Greg McKenzie:** I'm GMAC. Formally referred to as Gregory McKenzie my primary background is in accounting and I have a deep base of experience in marketing. To go along with my accounting training. I spent some time in direct sales. Some of that direct sales was door to door. And from that experience, I learned some best practices like making presentations, persuasive presentations. And, so I want to take and translate that experience into community fundraising. Building a base out of the base that already supports like most community organizations, so Alkebu-Lan village provides the perfect opportunity to sort of like prototype and work through ideas of how that can be done. Brother Ross and I've come together, collaboratively having a similar background to sort of like test case the idea of utilizing that skill set to develop a community base and create a fund that comes from the community and not from a donor or large philanthropic donor.

**Ross Harris:** And, I'm Ross Harris. I have over 16 years of experience and community organizing, particularly housing organizing, environmental justice, organizing, political organizing. My focus right now is on fundraising, organizing, fundraising coaching, through crowdfunding which means fundraising outside of the nonprofit industrial complex model. I have years of experience doing sales, marketing, door to door sales for a number of years and over the phone sales. So, my whole lens is coming from a community engagement strategy, learning how to build out that base and how to talk to your market, your donors, and put value in the product or the ideas that you have. So that's where I'm coming to the table helping Alkebu-Lan Village build out the blueprint to help create that donor base. Because there's a lot of great things that are offered here. And, I think if more of the community actually understood that and understood how it helps build the family, we can get more people involved. And not only in terms of donorship but also the active participant, which I think is key because when we think about power, my organizing experience tells me power is defined as organized people and organized dollars. So, how can we build that out? And we look at any company, any political party, they're focused on two main things: organized people, organized dollars.

**GM:** To that point, we've decided that our Alkebu-Lan campaign will be one of "friendraising" and fundraising. So not simply raising money but raising the awareness of what the village is doing to folks who would love to participate in it but just don't know about it. And then, you know, when we're studying how a person goes from merely a friend to someone who provides funds as well, because it's

everyone's responsibility, ultimately, to keep this going. And sure we have a budget that's based on some larger donors. But if they all disappeared, the only way that the community will be able to sustain this institution is if everybody chipped in a little bit to make it exist as possible. And, so we want to start now, getting people in the habit, like to say muscle memory of making a small contribution, \$10 a month, \$5 a month, \$25 a month. I want to add an additional \$60,000 to the base. And that's only 200 new donors at \$25 a month. And so it's very practical and doable to aggregate large sums from very small frequent donations.

**st:** So aggregating large sums from very frequent donations is fundraising. Tell me more about "friendraising."

**GM:** The friendraising is having more people know about Alkebulan Village and participate in our programs, services and activities. This is base building. Once they do that, then they will likely consider becoming a monthly donor.

**St:** So, friendraising is a more intimate process.

**GM:** Right. We want to go door to door in the neighborhood immediately and then working our way out, into the outer radius of this as the center. This means canvassing people, telling them about Alkebu-Lan Village and making a pitch for a donation. If, in fact, they don't want to or don't feel compelled to donate at that moment, then everybody will leave with some information and we'll hope to get contact information from them, to put them in a position to know about what we're doing. For example, be on a listserv or something else. Basically, be in contact in some digital way like a text message to give you information about upcoming events.

**RH:** I think that's important that we're also focused on that commitment of information, even if we don't get donations right at the door, we still get that contact. Data is power. Data is key. If we get a direct line of communication to these

**"The friendraising is having more people know about Alkebu-Lan Village and participate in our programs, services and activities. This is base building."**

people, it helps to draw them in. We can send out information which is needed. When I used to do direct sales, you might not get the person at the door. You might not get them to buy whatever you're selling. I was selling Comcast at the time, you might not get them to buy Comcast from you at that point in time. But what would happen sometimes is their AT&T would go out or their bill would go up. Later down the line and just having your information, your contact, you may be one of the first people on their mind. And, we have to think about the environment that we're in as Black people. There's something negative happening to us almost every day. So if I don't have time to donate, but you knock on my door, I got your contact information, and then I see something on news that's triggering that you just spoke on, I'm gonna call or I'm gonna make sure I come to that event. You may think, GMAC did knock on my door and talk about child safety and they just found that little girl or martial arts, so it's getting in the psyche of the population, that muscle memory. It's all about consistency. Even when we're talking about the farmers you work with, shakara, they are selling at Eastern Market and their products are a little bit higher than Joe Bob down the road and people are like, nah, I could just go down there where the prices are lower. But if we have the education piece we have an advantage. If they don't know about the economics of locally grown and why it's more expensive, then they see something possibly on the news talking about GMOs in food, it kind of clicks right there. I think education is key in terms of building the base essentially. Consistency.

**st:** I agree. So what does that education look like?

**RH:** So, when I'm talking to my leaders about doing crowdfunding, one of the first things that we talk about is, what is your story? If you're going to try to get donations to your campaign, what is the story? What is the overall story? Why is it important to you? Why is it important to the community as a whole? And who, what, when, where or how does that happen? So that's kind of like the educational piece you want to educate them on. How is this affecting you and how their contributions can change the overall picture.

**GM:** Yeah, so we're thinking of it from the standpoint of direct sales, product knowledge. If I think about Alkebulan Village as a product and I liken it to selling the Kirby vacuum, people will buy a Kirby vacuum from me because I can explain it in a way that makes them realize they need this product or service. So, it's about providing the information to make an informed decision. That's the education part for me.

**RH:** I remember the thing that was key for us is one of the things that we said people don't know what they want sometimes. Education is huge in terms of giving people the information but not info dumping, not making it too big, where it's too large of an idea to comprehend. So, like meeting them where they are, is always a good place to start. So that's one of the things that we used to do

when we knocked on doors, was trying to get information first, to try to figure out where they were. For example, we would say, "hey, how's your service going?" Or, "your neighbor saying that the bill was too high or it was over \$120. How much is your bill?" When I was doing political work, we were saying, "if there's one thing you could change in the neighborhood, what would you like to see change?" So, when you get that kind of information of 'where are you, then, now I know how to approach you in a sales standpoint or in a donation standpoint or in ideology. If we're talking about, you want to see the crime reduced in the area, I need to talk more about things that relate to crime, and how we are working to solve those things.

**GM:** And then, in addition to that, direct sales is often ruthless and immoral. Yeah, it's like the tip of the spear of capitalism. Like I'm shoving this product down your throat whether you want it or not, you know what I mean? And we seek to take from it, those elements that are useful, but not the pressure based, the manipulative parts. So, even when I was in the direct sales world, I did it in a way that was in line with my values as best as I could at that time. But now I'm gonna use that model to build a base for the community which is going to be even more important to me to maintain high levels of integrity or how we function and deal with people because some people are gullible and impressionable. And we don't want to be manipulating that. We start off first with a deep love for the people that we're serving and then everything flows from that.

**RH:** Sales is ruthless. But I always came from a standpoint of, if I am selling something, I am trying to improve your life. So, yes, it costs money. But if I can save you some money, let me help you save. And, if I find the area that you don't need, I'm not gonna push it on you, even though they want me to but if it doesn't make sense, it doesn't make sense. So when you get their ear, you're not gonna try to get them to believe your vision, you may want to point out things that they forgot or things they don't have time to think about. That's what a lot of direct sales and organizing is, is getting people to pull out

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their own conclusions based on the information that you give them. Technically, I'm not selling you anything. I'm just leading you down a path where you can make your own informed decision on which way is the best way to go.

**st:** Right. Education for liberation. We gotta understand that people have their own sets of values and skills and ways of just being and moving in the world. And you're building upon that. We want to draw out instead of assuming they are empty vessels that you can manipulate which is extremely oppressive. So, let's dig a little deeper. Let's talk more about what that looks like.

**GM:** We start the conversation with a question to sort of gauge where they are. Let's say we're going door to door and we're talking about the new development program at Alkebu-Lan Village. We'll start out knowing if they have children or not. And then from that, we start to share information about activities that are available for children at no cost, or the ones that are available for children at a cost, and what are all things that happen at Alkebu-Lan Village around children. And, in that way, we just start the conversation of finding out if there's some interest and direct parallels or connections. In developing the pitch, we start with an introduction, presentation, qualification and then a close. Then, at the close, we get something from them right in exchange for something from us. So, starting with the intro, find out what's going on, if they got children in the house or not. For people with children, we present the things that Alkebu-Lan Village has to offer. Qualification is finding out if they have the want or need to participate. They may not want to participate, if their children are in baseball and don't have the time or an African-centered perspective doesn't align with their values which are our organizational values. And, then in the closing, we bring them down to sign up for a martial arts program or become a monthly donor, at a minimum providing us that email and phone number so that we can stay in touch with them about future upcoming events. And, if we successfully get one of those three from them, we ask them for referrals with the goal

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being able to get people who are interested to tell us about other people who they think would be interested. And so then from those referrals, we now start to mushroom our impact through their networks.

**st:** So what if they don't want to listen to that original pitch? Like how do you get people to listen? How do you capture their attention?

**RH:** I honor their need and keep talking in hopes that something will resonate with them. Not to disrespect people, but a lot of times people just blow you off real quick. Because the social norm when you go to a store and someone say "hey, do you need help?" The response is "no, I don't need help." Then, usually five minutes later they actually do ask for help. If they really gotta go, we totally respect it. Give them a card that they can follow up with and read at their own leisure. It's a numbers game. It's persistence. That's why people don't like salespeople, because they're very persistent. But that's how you get the data. You get the base. That's how you get the sales. You get the donations by keeping track and then circling back around.

**GM:** And, rebuttals. So sales people thrive on rebuttals. We have the expectation that you're going to have a negative response. It's not personal against me. It is the overwhelming pressure of the world always asking you to do something or for something. So I want to help you realize that I'm not them. I'm not doing what they're doing. I'm talking about something different. I'm talking about something that's really valuable to you. And you just don't realize that yet because your conditioned response is to tell me, "no." So, I want to overcome that by asking you to reconsider listening to what I have to say for just a few moments. I'm not gonna take a lot of time. It's a misnomer that this has got to be lengthy. What I want to share with you is very brief. I'll leave you with some information and go see the next neighbor.

**RH:** And I think the average time that we're going to spend at a door is 5 or 10 minutes. In certain cases, we can set up a one-on-one to dive deeper. Have a conversation. Show him the grounds, maybe let them see some of the martial arts programs. But if we got them to come to a one on one more than likely they're going to be either a donor or they're gonna be part of a base building project because now we got you to do an actionable item. So even if we don't get you to donate, we got you to come. That's like the same thing. If you invited me into your house, if I get in the door, it's almost like a guaranteed sale. In terms of organizing, if I get you to come to a window, then more than likely I can get you to donate some time to whatever kind of campaign we're working on. So it's kind of the same thing of trying to be at the door to do the introduction and to draw out some questions, draw out some answers, and then be able to move them to the next ladder of engagement. This is base building.

**st:** What's a very succinct definition for base building?

**GM:** To get new members essentially, to increase the membership. More people participating in the services, programs and activities and by participating finding value in the organization and supporting, accordingly. People have to find the value in it before they support it. And, we do this by first defining the goals. What is it that we want to get? For example, we said we need 200 people to subscribe to \$25 a month to add an additional \$60,000 to Alkebu-Lan Village's budget to provide a salary base that is not contingent on donor base funding. So, we will have immovable people who work here who can be continually working regardless of what program we're receiving funds from. So after identifying the donor base, we approach that group of people to subscribe and participate. For example, Alkebu-Lan Village has a list of maybe 200 people as our donor base. Not all of them will subscribe, but some percentage of them will. And, then, we ask if they could provide the names of 5 people that they know and we don't who may want to support the organizational mission.

**st:** And, what about the people that would expect something in return for providing those referrals like more of a transactional process? What do you tell them?

**GM:** I would tell them that the return is sustaining an institution that is over 45 years old and has provided services to over 300,000 children and families. And, they're paying it forward for the future to 300,000 children and families who can be served over the next 45 years.

**RH:** And, we have to emphasize how we are not a corporation that is making money off of this. The people are benefiting and everybody loves somebody that comes to the room with resources. If we ask people to call 5 people and share resources, they are helping their own network as well. And, that is the reward, helping people.

**st:** I could see how that would resonate with some and not others.

**"Organized dollars and organized people. We're not organizing dollars to exploit people. We're not organizing dollars to make any one person rich. We're organizing our dollars to be able to fight systematic oppression. And, if you don't have the dollars... there's still a space for you."**

**RH:** I want to dive deeper into base building because it's such a loose big word. What is it all about? It all comes down to relationship building. Even when we think about being organized like what is your network? What is your own relationship like? So developing those authentic relationships with individuals and groups is important. Building and rebuilding relationships as part of the base building process is crucial. Some people may know about Alkebu-Lan Village, for instance, but they don't have direct contact so it is our job to go into the community to rebuild those relationships. There are some people with skill sets that can help push the work forward and those people get connected, now we're doing leadership development or leadership building.

**GM:** When we're going to the community asking, "do you have children or what are some issues you'd like to see change?" we're doing issue identification through base building too. So now you know that X amount of people from this district or this neighborhood are looking specifically to have these things addressed. Now that we know that, we can have specific programming that addresses those things. And, even if it's not Alkebu-Lan Village addressing those things, maybe they know of another Black organization doing it. And, this is where coalition building comes in.

**st:** Thanks for explaining that. Let's talk about capitalism. How this approach resides in an anti-capitalist framework. So, how do we use this approach that you all are unfolding within a system of capitalism, but also resisting it at the same time?

**GM:** The key concept in capitalism is exploitation. So what we are really seeking to do is getting cooperation and collaboration going. There's no real essential "product" to it. We get the people onboard by filling in the missing gaps by providing a needed service to the community that is not provided in the home, school or elsewhere in the hopes of making a more resilient community.

**RH:** There's no ethical consumption under capitalism at all right? This approach is socialist. It's coming from a community

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standpoint of serving needs. Capitalism is very individualistic. So when we're saying that we need the help of a community, we're involved in the community. That's in direct competition or direct opposition to capitalism. We're pooling our resources. We're helping the community. We're actually speaking to them. And, we're together, which is the opposite. It goes back to power, again. Organized dollars and organized people. We're not organizing dollars to exploit people. We're not organizing dollars to make any one person rich. We're organizing our dollars to be able to fight systematic oppression. And, if you don't have the dollars, that's still okay. There's still a space for you. And when we go back to leadership development, we talk about base building we're helping people find their own power with that. So some people say what can I do to a big system, and I live in this type of neighborhood and I don't have that much of an income to really contribute. Well, we tell them \$5 is enough when we talk about having 10,000 people put \$5 together. What can we all get from that? So it's helping people realize the power of each other, and how collectively we can achieve much more with our \$5 than we can individually which is the complete opposite of capitalism, right?

**st:** And that's the whole emphasis on cooperatives and collectives, the more you pool your resources together, the closer we're getting to beating capitalism at it's own game. And, so I want to end by talking more directly about how this manifests within a spirit of Black cooperativism and collectivity?

**GM:** So, the more people we can get involved, the more we can network and share resources across multiple categories of activity. It starts with us bringing them together, frequently aggregating small sums of money to support an institution. Once we're all gathered together, we all bring various different things to the table. And, then we have the opportunity to skill share, network, and further the objectives of everybody involved. This synergy balloons into conversations leading to meetings, new initiatives, etc. that didn't exist already. So I just see it as a fertile ground for opportunity.

**RH:** Yeah and in terms of connecting with the community, we're also asking for them to participate in leadership. We're asking, "what are some things you would like to change, what do you feel needs to happen in the community?" So, we're asking for your participation and also asking if you have any skills that you can contribute. So, that's the part of that democratic participation of us all having a shared voice. And then also, looking at the economics and the social justice part of it. We're collectively doing it for our own social justice mission, which is a more equitable lens than we've seen in any other type of system. Like shakara said, cooperativism is the only way that we can really beat this beast. So making sure that we drive that message to the people as we're talking to them at the door, as we're bringing them in and letting them know that this cooperative or this collective mission is something that can change the system.

**GM:** It's a way forward compared to this system that has us moving backwards, basically, against our own best interest.

**RH:** Because one thing that I've noticed is when you talk to people, we all know the issues. Like even the most detached person from African-centered knowledge still knows the issues. Right? They don't know where to go, or they don't know how to act. So if we can have a collective space where you know how to activate being a leader or being in a community with other leaders, then you can find your voice.

**st:** Good point. What are three action steps that people can use around base building and leveraging Black dollars in the community and organizing?

**GM:** First step would be to develop a plan for how they want to do that. Start with the plan first, then work the plan and evaluate it. Essentially, that's really what it boils down to. Inside the plan is identifying the goals, defining the donor base, figuring out what the fundraising mix of that donor base would look like, creating the calendar, doing some budgeting, implementing and then monitoring and evaluating. Work the plan. Evaluate it and do it again, learning from what you did to continue to make it better and better and better.

**RH:** First step is surveys. Do a community needs assessment. When we think about community organizing, political organizing, sales, one of the first things that we all do is ask what is the community need? And, we can do this through a number of ways, meetings or door to door campaigns. You want to find out where everyone's at. What do people want to see changed right? Then, you may want to go into relationship building and engagement and then finding other people who could have skill sets to help build out that campaign to do what we're talking about doing here. Last, then we focus on leadership development and capacity building, which can come through exactly as GMAC was saying. But I think if the first step would be the needs assessment, I think that's key especially if you're looking to find out where people are in terms of the type of food they want and so on.

**st:** One last question... There are a lot of naysayers out there that talk about the impossibility of rebuilding Black intergenerational wealth through these approaches and others. What do you say to those skeptics?

**GM:** What is the basis of their skepticism?

**st:** There are a range of things ranging from money misappropriation, lack of community trust, inadequate wealth in Black communities to create any traction and much more.

**GM:** There's a whole other set of reasons why people say that won't work. So, it's a well documented fact that Black spending is north of a trillion dollars annually, which is larger than the gross domestic

product of small nations like Germany. So there's enough money in the Black community. The Black dollar is the engine of the United States and time period and the old notion that we don't have wealth is a misnomer. And, the trust has to be dealt with. We've internalized the oppression and to that point, we are doing the wackness that 'the others' would do, like the other groups that seek to oppress and undermine. We have to do better, but I've seen it work. I've seen where us putting our money into something has been a viable way for us to sustain it for us to maintain it. I think the key to it is transparency. So this destroyed the Shrine of the Black Madonna as a shining example of the aggregation of Black wealth into nation building. At the height of the organization, they had apartment buildings across the country. They had a fleet of cars, they had all of the things that they needed to be a self contained nation. And, then when leadership transitioned, some of that transparency integrity, moral high ground got lost to some degree, and then the whole thing was undermined. But if the transparency and the morality is on point, it can work. We certainly have the money and the trust will come from proof when you buy big buildings and you know acquire large fleets of vehicles and things like that and you show the people who are participating that we are doing what we say we will do so I think we got to show them proof of what's possible.

**RH:** We've seen people use our attention, our consumption, our dollars to grow extraordinarily wealthy spaces. They have used our collective vote to get in office. Pretty much just misuses it in so many different ways, collectively. So, when I hear people say, "it can't happen." I know it can happen because you see the rest of the world doing it, using us, misusing us. So why can't we internally use ourselves in a productive way? All we got to do is just change how our focus is, being transparent. Yes, it's gonna take a while for trust, right? Because we've always been told through all types of media, not to trust each other. Right? So we can start with the youth. If you're just focusing on youth and teens and what happens when they become 20. What happens when they become 30? They got this whole experience of being raised in a cooperative environment, where now that's part of their inner workings. So, I think it definitely can happen.

**st:** For sure. How it happens is often the question, for me.

**RH:** Sterling Heights and Dearborn is funded off of Black dollars. My daughters go to high school in Utica and Auburn Hills. A Lot of their friends at school are Chaldean and happen to ask them, "what do your parents do? She said, "Oh, my dad, has a couple of stores in Detroit like grocery stores, corner stores, smoke shops, dispensaries." Who is his base? Us! We are the base! We fund a whole \$300,000-\$400,000 mansion out in Utica off of batteries, chips and whatever.

**GM:** Then, the underground economy, they aggregate the wealth out there in those suburban communities, buy drugs and put it in the hands of brothers and sisters in our community to further degrade the community, the progress of the community needs and strategies. So again, they're parasitically attached to the Black community.

**RH:** So, know that we got the money, even if we were just able to take EBT benefits, funnel them into one grocery store that's Black owned. Or, even if we own a You Buy, We Fry. You know how many people are getting rich off of those chains.

**st:** Right. Especially with the "EBT accepted here" sign.

**RH:** And, all they gotta do is pay a \$1 fry fee.

**st:** The work we have to do is real. Thank you both for making the time for this conversation. I have a lot of hope and excitement for our community.

## ***Gregory McKenzie***

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Gregory McKenzie, a life-long Detroiter, is a graduate of the Detroit Public School system. He attained an Associates of Arts Degree from Lewis College of Business in 1999, a Bachelor's of Arts Degree in Business Management from Davenport University in 2004 and a Master's in Business Administration (CPA concentration) from Davenport University in 2013. He has worked in accounting in various industries over the past 25 years. As a second generation accountant, Gregory provides accounting and business consulting services through the family owned and operated firm Unicorn Unlimited, Inc. Of notable mention are the experiences gained in the manufacturing and public accounting industries. Through these experiences, Gregory has honed a skill set in material cost accounting, profitability analysis, new accounting system set-up, software training, month and year end closing, and financial statement compilation.

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## ***Ross Harris***

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Ross Harris is ioby's Detroit Action Strategist, where he partners with neighbors and community-minded individuals across Southeast Michigan to create community-driven power and sustainable change. Ross believes that community power comes from the people when they're informed and organized. Over the past 13 years he has committed himself to informing the community in various roles, working as a housing counselor, community organizer, and activist. Racial equity and justice is the motivation that keeps Ross committed to the community he serves. In Ross' spare time he loves to garden, kayak, camp, and spend time with his four beautiful children.