

We Rise Together program building a rising tide of economic recovery in Black and Latinx communities

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Chicago Tribune

Published: Jan 12, 2024 at 5:00 am



Julia Perkins, center, teaches a yoga class at her business, Studio Yogi, on East 71st Street on Dec. 13, 2023. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

As it approaches the halfway mark of its five-year plan, We Rise Together, an initiative of the [Chicago Community Trust](#), is checking off its accomplishments while staying laser-focused on its upcoming efforts.

“We Rise Together: For an Equitable and Just Recovery” is an economic recovery accelerator aiding Black and Latinx communities hit hardest by the pandemic.

“We have to create an imagination for what Chicago would look like if every community was thriving,” said program director Christen Wiggins.

The endeavor has yielded funding and support for [35 neighborhood real estate projects](#) since September 2021 — an investment of more than \$38 million on properties that are now worth more than \$366 million.

In that time, 12 of those neighborhood investments opened their doors, including [Justice of the Pies](#) in the Avalon Park neighborhood, [PODER Learning Center](#) (a community hub where immigrants receive education and resources) in the Gage Park community, and [Studio Yogi](#) in South Shore, a center that aims to build a health and wellness space for the area.

“To be able to see 12 projects already open in two years, that is real change,” Wiggins said. “Sometimes people don’t understand that an investment in any part of the city benefits the whole city. We Rise Together, it’s an idea, an aspiration, but truthfully, there’s decades of research that shows you can’t leave a part of the city behind and think it’s gonna just stay over there. What happens if we all live in thriving communities? The whole Chicago gets better. You have to keep convincing people of that over and over again.” Julia Perkins got \$400,000 from We Rise Together for Studio Yogi. After renovations at 1840 E. 71st St., the yoga studio opened in February 2023. There are now 22 classes a week with myriad styles of yoga. Perkins said she designed the fee structure to be inclusive for individuals and families by offering memberships and drop-in rates.

For 2024, Perkins looks forward to increasing memberships and focusing on getting more of a younger demographic into her doors. Studio Yogi has already seen people from Whiting and Humboldt Park. With the majority of her clientele coming from South Shore, Perkins said she continually partners with area organizations for events and wants to deepen the business’ footprint in the area.

“The design truly embraced the atmosphere that I wanted people to encounter when they walked into the studio in terms of being welcoming and inclusive,” she said. “I think word-of-mouth is getting out. [CBS did a story on us](#) where a couple of people that were interviewed said it felt like family here and that’s the feel that I wanted, because community is family.”

With one tenant already lined up for the 6,500 square foot building, Perkins is looking for another, a wellness business that fits into the remaining 799 square feet.



Julia Perkins teaches a yoga class at her business, Studio Yogi, on East 71st Street on Dec. 13, 2023. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

“We have been so accustomed to accepting substandard service, substandard quality. What does that convey, that that’s what we deserve? That’s just not true. We are deserving of having high-quality services within our community,” Perkins said. She is thankful to We Rise Together for helping her manifest that deservedness and adding value to the area.

Last month, We Rise Together spoke about its progress at its Loop office. Data was shared about credit card spending in the Austin area after the opening of the North Austin Community Center in February. According to Jennifer Axelrod, senior director of learning and impact at the Chicago Community Trust, after seven months of the community center opening, businesses within a mile of the site saw a nearly \$1.8 million spike in consumer spending.

Wiggins said this shows how such investments are game-changers for areas that have long experienced disinvestment. Nedra Sims Fears, executive director of the Greater Chatham Initiative and the head of the nonprofit [FoodLab Chicago](#), a resource for the South Side restaurant community, shared that the Greater Chatham area is the capital of soul food, and Caribbean and West African food in Chicagoland.

“We have data that shows 2 million people come and eat in Chatham. We need help to support our restaurateurs and our bakeries ... because they are a destination,” she said.

“We made a very intentional decision to lean into the intelligence from community leaders and move forward projects led by community leaders, and we have not been disappointed,” Wiggins said.

Another We Rise Together project is the [Xquina Incubator and Cafe](#) in South Lawndale. Breaking ground in December, the 13,000-square-foot property is being renovated to house a business incubator, a co-working office space, a cafe and a shared commercial kitchen. Kim Close, executive director of the Foundation of Little Village, the organization behind the project, said We Rise Together’s assistance sustained the project. The first phase of construction is expected to be completed by this summer.

“There are incredible hurdles that you have to overcome and an endless amount of red tape and without flexible capital from a partner like We Rise, I don’t know what we would have done. We would have come up with something ... probably more loans,” Close said. “We Rise and Christen (Wiggins), they’re true partners that stuck with us. We tell them the problems that we are having and they are supportive instead of being like, ‘What’s wrong with you?’”

When finished, Xquina, which has a Spanish-language focus, will be an integral piece of the Little Village business ecosystem, offering retail space, programming and services for entrepreneurs in the area. Close said the group behind Xquina also wants to expand its micro-grant program and its [financial literacy boot camp](#), and attract investment to Little Village.



Spanish-speaking adult students hone their English language skills during a class at PODER learning center on April 19, 2023. (Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune)

We Rise is “investing in real estate projects on the South and West sides so nonprofits that are running them can create real impact in the community,” Close said. “That is the real value that we are trying to bring to the community, that we’re working on delivering ... part of our corridor revitalization and community wealth-building pillars ... because we want to see increased investment in ownership and also in the businesses to help them grow capacity and grow their revenue.”

Luis Gutierrez, CEO of Latinos Progresando, said when We Rise Together funds were available to his organization, it was able to attract other funders. Latinos Progresando is centered on rehabilitating a former Chicago Public Library branch building vacant since 2009, to serve as a community resource. The property will be occupied by Latinos Progresando and partner tenants, Esperanza Health Centers and Lincoln Park Zoo. Gutierrez said more outside investment needs to be put into community nonprofits, organizations that know the environments, issues, leaders and people’s needs.

“We need to be looking at our commercial corridors in all of our neighborhoods and figuring out how do we build a sustainable corridor that offers a little bit of everything so that you can shop within our community?” he said.

Wiggins said by the time the initiative sunsets, about \$50 million will have been distributed among Chicagoland neighborhood projects. Wiggins said putting a firm end date on We Rise Together has gotten the team to move quickly and to trust the community more.

“We’ve got more to do — workforce grants, a final round of neighborhood anchor grants that we’re going to be announcing in February,” Wiggins said. “We’re going to continue to provide more resources into those same communities around the workforce and small businesses to continue building the ecosystem of a healthy local economy.”