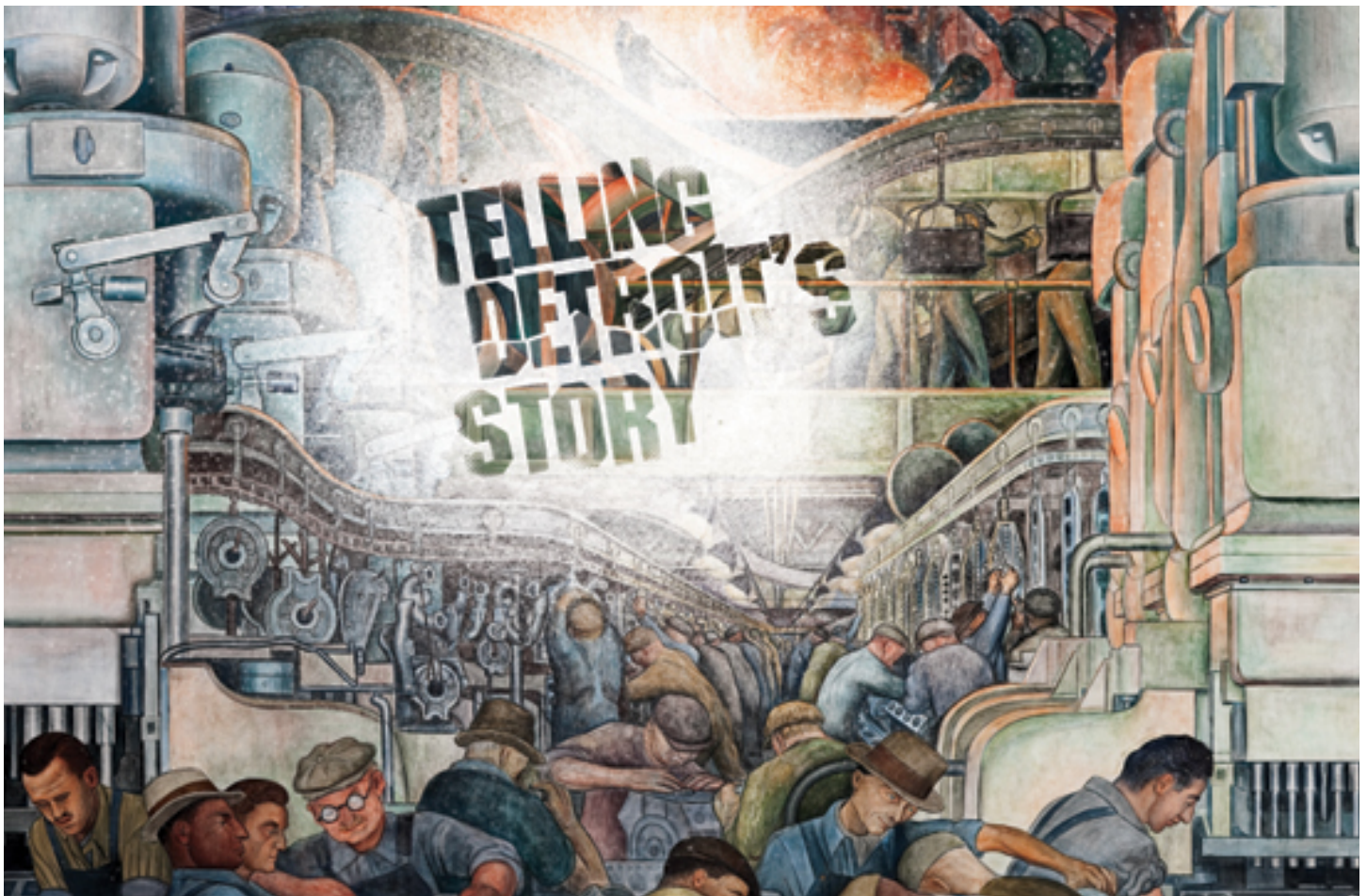


DETROIT143: 2012-2015

Neighborhood-building from the bottom up



DETAIL FROM DETROIT INDUSTRY MURALS BY DIEGO RIVERA, COURTESY OF THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

A detail from the poster for the one-day teach-in and community conference, "Taking Charge of Our Story," that resulted in the launch of the Detroit143 project.

DETROIT143 IS AN INNOVATIVE EFFORT

to advance neighborhood stabilization with a bottom-up strategy that empowers residents and small businesses. Working with grants from Knight Foundation (\$50,000 in 2012) and Kresge Foundation (\$100,000 in 2014), Detroit143 has documented success over 4 years in using hyper-local journalism to help resolve major neighborhood issues while deploying traditional and social/digital marketing to support and expand small neighborhood business.

Detroit has seen numerous civic efforts to "turn around" the city and reverse its steady, 60-year decline. To name just a few major chapters in Detroit's attempted renaissance, there was the opening of the Renaissance Center in the late 1970s, the renovation of the Fox

"We can begin by doing small things at the local level, like planting community gardens or looking out for our neighbors. That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously."

– Grace Lee Boggs, [Seeds of Change](#)

Theater in the late 1980s, the opening of Comerica Park in 2000 and now the renovation of downtown spearheaded by Dan Gilbert.

History, however, has shown that Detroit's wide racial divides, widespread redlining, physical blight, persistent

job loss and (consequently) shrinking tax base are all stubbornly resistant to major investments downtown and other top-down strategies for change. None of Detroit's "renaissances" has been long-lived. None has had any material impact on the neighborhoods beyond the Woodward corridor.

DETROIT143'S NEIGHBORHOOD-BASED APPROACH IS VERY DIFFERENT:

- 1. Build the neighborhood's capacity for self-determination by providing in-depth news on the issues most important to the community and by generating the widest possible attention and support for resolving those issues; and**
- 2. Build the neighborhood's capacity for economic growth by supporting local businesses with low-cost marketing that increases their customer base, builds revenue and supports increased employment.**

DETROIT143 WAS FOUNDED by Bill Mitchell, Kirk Cheyfitz and New Detroit's Shirley Stancato in 2011 and has been led continuously by Mitchell and Cheyfitz with New Detroit acting as fiduciary and advisor. Importantly, the mission of New Detroit has helped shape Detroit143 throughout its existence: "to identify and eliminate racial disparities in the region by building economic equity, social justice and racial understanding." The three founders created the neighborhood-based news and marketing organization as a result of organizing and running "Taking Charge of Our Story," a one-day community conference and teach-in on March 18, 2010 at Wayne State.

The size and duration of the grants received by Detroit143 did not permit the hiring of full-time staff. Virtually all work for Detroit143 was performed on a freelance basis by Detroit journalists, marketers, designers, technologists and students. The exceptions are the long-term efforts of the founders and of Amanda Lewan, a Detroit entrepreneur and digital marketer who headed the marketing program of Detroit143 from 2012 to the present. In addition, Ellen

Jacob, a photographer whose work on race, gender and domestic labor has received international acclaim, has provided photography and design services to Detroit143 since its inception. The founders also acknowledge the long-term advice and support of Story Worldwide, the advertising and storytelling agency that Cheyfitz founded. The news and marketing work of Detroit143 is described in this wrap-up report to Kresge.

In completing and documenting this exploration of hyper-local news and marketing, Detroit143 has fulfilled the mission spelled out in our original grant applications: to demonstrate the power and viability of small news organizations to help resolve major neighborhood (and citywide) issues while also helping to build the neighborhood economy.

Detroit143 intends to use these results to seek expanded funding so full-time organizations can be built in one or more neighborhoods in Detroit and other cities.

143 Detroit143
Published by Bill Mitchell [?] · May 22, 2014 · 🌐

As residents streamed into Mayor Duggan's community meeting in City Council District 6 this week, we intercepted as many as we could and asked them if they had a one-sentence message for Mayor Duggan. We were struck by how many believe he's off to a strong start. Are we witnessing a honeymoon or the start of something different in City Hall?

DETROIT 143 A MESSAGE FOR THE MAYOR

"Thank you! I can see the difference -- trash, lights -- really loving the trash pick-up."
-- April Davis Eastburn

When Mayor Duggan came to Southwest, Detroit143's Facebook page posted the residents' messages to the mayor.



DETROIT143 PHOTO BY ELLEN JACOB

Southwest Detroit residents overwhelmingly identified their neighborhood's broken streetlights as their biggest concern. This is West Grand Boulevard in 2014.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE LESSONS THAT DETROIT143 TAUGHT US ABOUT JOURNALISM AS A TOOL OF NEIGHBORHOOD STABILIZATION:

- Explicit engagement of audience, even with modest pursuit of qualitative rather than quantitative results, is critical to creating journalism that resonates with and delivers results for an audience.
- As valuable as competition among media outlets can be, collaboration among them will probably yield more useful results for the audiences they serve. This is true especially when small start-ups (like Detroit143) and established media figure out ways of partnering to leverage their different strengths and areas of focus.
- The same spirit of collaboration should extend to media platforms, making good use of venues already popular among the communities to be served as well as launching innovative approaches on our own site.
- Although most audience members have no interest in writing news stories or becoming "citizen journalists," many are quite interested in and capable of making important contributions via other forms of media.
- Strong focus is critical, both in terms of topic and geography. The trick is reporting and writing about the specific in ways that hold universal significance and interest.



DETROIT143 PHOTO BY ELLEN JACOB

One of a series of photographs published by Detroit143 to document the total darkness that descended on Southwest Detroit when the public lighting failed.

THERE IS INTERESTING MIDDLE GROUND to be explored between traditional media approaches of let-the-chips-fall-where-they-may reporting and advocacy journalism. For the sake of discussion, let's call it "consequential journalism," an evidence-based approach aimed at provoking specific civic improvements.

To maximize effectiveness, community-focused reporting is best done by journalists engaged in, if not residing in, the relevant communities on a full-time basis.

And here's some of what Detroit143 taught us about growth strategies for neighborhood businesses as foundational to neighborhood life:

- Begin by abandoning most traditional approaches of promotional, interruptive advertising, replacing them with informative, entertaining narratives.
- Figure out how the neighborhood business serves the neighborhood and vice versa.
- Discern the core story of the business or enterprise whose fortunes you're hoping to grow. This will be the narrative that best differentiates the business and connects with its customers/prospects/audiences.

- Determine ways of working with the enterprise's best customers to find new ones.
- Discover where these existing and potential customers spend their digital time, and map the enterprise's digital presence and strategy accordingly.
- Experiment with a mix of in-person events and digital initiatives to find combinations most successful at growing customer base and maximizing revenues.



Detroit143's first story in the series on the city's broken street lights. It appeared in both The Detroit News and Detroit143.org.

Both our marketing and our journalism were aimed at building economic equity in the communities we were serving, an objective aligned with New Detroit's mission. Helping achieve economic justice in a diverse community such as Southwest Detroit, in other words, became one way of meeting the challenge "to identify and eliminate racial disparities in the region."

We'll expand on these ideas in the discussion that follows. We've extracted many of our journalism lessons from our investigation into the abysmal state of street lighting in Detroit neighborhoods. Our discussion of marketing and neighborhood business development is largely focused on our work with Café Con Leche, a go-to neighborhood gathering spot in Southwest Detroit and a new, second location on West Grand Boulevard in mid-town.

THE JOURNALISM: COVERING HYPER-LOCAL ISSUES WITH UNIVERSAL SIGNIFICANCE

WHEN WE (CHEYFITZ AND MITCHELL)

RETURNED TO DETROIT in early 2012 after securing a \$50,000 grant from the Knight Foundation, we rented temporary quarters in graduate student housing at Wayne State University. Driving around town for various night meetings and returning to campus, we noticed plenty of differences from our time working in the city decades before. But nothing was quite as dramatic as the dark streets we encountered in the neighborhoods and on such thoroughfares as Gratiot. Although the numbers had not been thoroughly reported at that time, it turned out that 40 percent of the city's 88,000 streetlights had gone dark over the years, with many residents despairing that their walk or drive home would ever again be illuminated.

When we first interviewed the people and organizations of the Southwest Detroit neighborhood (roughly, Council District 6) in early 2012, we repeatedly were told the primary issue facing the neighborhood was the adverse impact of having virtually no street lighting.

Detroit143 launched an investigative journalism project to find out why the lights were out, what the impact was and what could be done to get them back on. This

work resulted in a series of in-depth stories that ran on Detroit143's site and in the Detroit News opinion section about the situation in Southwest Detroit and the citywide crisis being caused by the breakdown of the streetlights.

As a start-up news organization with a limited budget, Detroit143 had no way of gathering a significant audience for its reporting. We knew we needed a partner with a much stronger distribution channel at its disposal, so we approached the news sections of the Detroit News and Detroit Free Press. Editors on the news side at both papers expressed reservations about publishing journalism funded by a foundation. In the case of both papers, the opinion sections eventually welcomed the work we did with both Knight and Kresge funding. Concern about foundation funding of news, though resolved in many markets, remains an issue worth addressing in more detail than is appropriate for this report.

Detroit143's reporting on the streetlight issue was cited in the international press, [Bloomberg News](#), [NPR's Marketplace show](#) and other news outlets.

The coverage contributed to the pressure that helped lead to passage of Act 392 of 2012, the Michigan Municipal Lighting Authority Act, which established a lighting authority with the ability to issue bonds and use the money to replace Detroit's broken streetlights. The authority closed on the sale of \$185 million in bonds on June 25, 2014. "Lighting is an essential component to revitalizing Detroit," Governor Rick Snyder said that day.

A growing number of approaches and technologies are available to journalists interested in engaging audiences. One day in April 2012, we realized (belatedly) that then Mayor Bing was scheduled to deliver his annual State of the City address later that evening. With the help of social media friends in various Detroit media outlets, we alerted people to a People's State of the City survey we posted online and that invited people to complete a simple sentence: "The state of my Detroit community today is..." Our report on [the results of the survey](#), published a few days later in the Free Press, noted: "The most interesting among several dozen responses didn't come from the

optimists or the pessimists. The most provocative ideas reflected, instead, a point of view best described as: "It's complicated."

Among the assessments of life in the city was this comment from a 53 year-old Detroiter who works in Southfield: "...Great from a people perspective, but lighting sucks."



Cafe con Leche's home page on the web shows owner Jordi Carbonel at his usual duty station behind the counter of the original Southwest Detroit location.

The survey helped Detroit143 set its agenda for coverage and made the point, from the outset, that this would be a community-based initiative.

As we assessed the results of our first phase, funded by Knight, and planned for a Chapter Two with Kresge funding, we realized that we could increase our effectiveness dramatically by focusing on just one part of town. We chose Southwest Detroit, with the boundaries of our focus generally matching those of City Council District 6.

Following the principle of sharp focus on the particular in pursuit of universally-relevant ideas, we examined, among other things, why [a single block in Southwest Detroit was showing signs of resilience](#) and how [a woman-owned business was gaining traction in Corktown](#). And when the mayor came to Southwest Detroit to speak to a neighborhood gathering, we provided a megaphone on Facebook for residents to be heard as well. A small team assembled by Detroit143 intercepted as many residents as possible as they

entered Greater Apostolic Faith Temple for the meeting. We asked them to deliver a message to the mayor in a single sentence, which we published in a formatted presentation on the Detroit143 Facebook page.

ON DETROIT143'S OWN PAGE, we introduced a number of interactive elements that enabled community members to take part in the agenda-setting, storytelling and problem-solving we saw as so critical to neighborhood stabilization. Among other things, we incorporated into our site SeeClickFix, a tool adopted a year later by the city as its "Improve Detroit" app for smartphones. SeeClickFix enables residents to report things that need fixing -- potholes, trash in the street, a dangerously abandoned building, etc.

We coordinated our launch with the City Water Department as it began testing the tool to track down and shut off the many incidents of broken pipes and water running from abandoned buildings, sometimes for years at a time without repair. The city reported recently that the tool has helped residents address more than 10,000 problems, including more than 3,000 illegal dumping sites cleaned and 2,092 potholes fixed.

We also incorporated HL Twitter, a tool that enabled us to gather all Tweets of people and organizations with an interest in Southwest Detroit and present them in an automatically updated feed on the right rail of our site. Our use of the [Ampsy tool](#) enabled residents to post their Instagram and Twitter photos directly to the Detroit143 site.

These tools, like Detroit143's reporting, were implemented with their consequences in mind – especially the stabilization of Southwest Detroit neighborhoods. What do we mean by "consequential journalism?" In 1999, Yale University Press published a book by journalism scholar Jay Rosen titled "What are Journalists For?" Rosen explored the linkage between journalism and democratic life, especially the "public journalism" movement that stirred such controversy in the field in the 1990s. With Detroit143, we've posed a similar question: "What is Journalism For?" Or more precisely, "What is the journalism we're doing in Southwest Detroit for?" We believe that providing an answer to that question – our answer: to help stabilize neighborhoods – lent a focus and an attention



DETROIT143 PHOTO BY ELLEN JACOB

The new location in the New Center—Café con Leche Nord—is becoming a community center just like the original café on W. Vernor Highway.

to successful strategies that differentiated us from journalism as usual.

Going forward, we hope that both city officials and foundation leaders intensify their focus on improving the quality of life in the city's neighborhoods. Some form of consequential journalism will be an essential ingredient of such improvement, as it remains the best means available to spotlight and then drive action to address a neighborhood's most pressing needs.

THE DETROIT143 AGENCY: LOW-COST MULTI-CHANNEL MARKETING FOR SMALL BUSINESS

Café con Leche was founded in 2007 as a Latin-infused coffee house and community gathering space in the heart of the multi-racial, multi-ethnic, heavily Latino Southwest Detroit neighborhood.

From the beginning, the owners, Jordi Carbonel and Melissa Fernandez, saw their family's café not merely as a means of making money: it was to be an expression of their heritage—a heritage shared by many in the Southwest Detroit neighborhood—and a center of community support that could display local

art and host local meetings. It was Café con Leche's role as both a profit center and a community center that led us to select it as the first client of the micro-marketing agency we named Detroit143 Agency, an agency that took the place in Detroit143 that a typical advertising sales department occupies in traditional news operations.

With Jordi handling day-to-day operations, Café con Leche soon fulfilled the owners' wish for it to become the site of neighborhood social, political and cultural events, as well as a welcoming hangout for local people of all races and viewpoints. Despite its success as a neighborhood institution, however, it was a borderline enterprise economically.

When Detroit143 Agency first met with Jordi, the café's sales were stagnant at roughly breakeven. The café also was weighed down by some \$10,000 in unpaid rent and other debt stemming from business problems in 2009. It badly needed to expand its customer base and increase revenue.

The café then had two Facebook pages, one of which had formerly been Jordi's personal page. There was confusion about which Facebook was the café's "real"

AT THE CAFÉ



WORKING BEGINS AT CAFE CON
LECHE



UPLIFTING THE COFFEE SPIRIT WITH
CHRIS



POUR-OVER THE DARING FLAVOR
OF THESE NEW COFFEES

Café con Leche's blog keeps patrons and prospects current on news from both locations. The blog is one feature of the web site created for the café by the Detroit143 Agency.

online home. It had no web site, no online menu, no publishing plan for Facebook and no overall marketing plan at all.

During 2014, we worked with Jordi to build a long-lasting, differentiating brand for Café con Leche around his own mantra "Stronger, Sweeter, Daring," which we saw as a brand that reflects the café and its home, the Southwest neighborhood. The agency created a low-cost digital marketing plan and a new home for all the café's digital marketing. Detroit143 Agency provided professional marketing services that included brand strategy, story development, logo design, copywriting, custom fonts, professional photography, and the design and custom development of a fully responsive (suitable for all mobile and

desktop devices) Wordpress [website](#). (Importantly, the café website was developed as a template that will work for any number of small businesses.)

Detroit143 Agency built and launched the café website and reformatted and consolidated the [Facebook](#) pages into a single presence without losing a single follower.

In the fall of 2014, we began to meet with Jordi to plan for the launch of a second location for the café on West Grand Blvd. in the New Center area. Jordi and Melissa were hoping that expanding to the new location would increase both the number and professionalism of the café's employees while also increasing sales. This would allow them to prioritize their own time over a larger revenue base and increase the cash they could take out of the business to meet their family's living

expenses. But none of that would happen, of course, unless new customers showed up.

Throughout the fall and winter of 2014-15, Detroit143 Agency created shareable social media posts and long-form blog posts to create wider awareness of the café and its planned new location. During the opening weeks of January, 2015, the new café –Café con Leche Nord– had a “soft launch” as requested by the owners. The Detroit 143 Detroit team set strategic messaging for social media advertisements, developed and finalized the recommended ads and celebrated the official opening at the end of January.

As the harsh winter continued, our marketing efforts focused very much on targeting the nearby office workers and residents of the New Center area with the aim to get customers out of buildings and into the café. We printed and distributed more than 1,000 flyers. About 250 were passed out to current customers at the Southwest Detroit location while the remaining were passed out over several weeks at offices, small businesses, residential apartments, hospitals and building entrances in New Center/Midtown.

Simultaneously, we kicked off paid promotions, focusing heavily on Facebook. Many of the people we encountered in person reported having seen the online ads and expressed a positive interest in the café. We believe the combination of on-the-ground flyering and heavy social promotions around the launch drastically increased brand awareness at a critical time. This impression is backed up by research from major ad agencies and marketing research firms that documents the power of multi-channel marketing to improve results two- to four-fold over single-channel and traditional advertising.

As 2015 began to warm up, so did our diverse marketing efforts. We continued to tweak and adjust our advertising to strategically promote the New Center location. At the same time, we reached out to active community groups in Detroit to partner for local events. We hosted several events in the late winter and spring including: Build’s Valentine’s Day Bazaar, the June Foodlab Detroit graduation (a food entrepreneur program), and Windows on Frida art display and grand



This sign was placed outside the hall in Southwest Detroit where citizens gathered to hear the new mayor’s first public meeting in the neighborhood.

opening. Events—promoted online, in the cafes and on the street—produced the highest and most immediate impact on direct sales and, thus, the highest ROI. We saw this as a success and have strategically pushed to partner for more events in the fall of 2015 and onward.

In mid-summer of 2015, Jordi and Melissa made us aware that they were being forced to consider closing the original Southwest Detroit location because of old debt that had mounted up. They expressed an interest in crowdfunding through the local Detroit-based company Patronicity. Patronicity was very hands-on and helpful, providing valuable knowledge into the world of successful crowdfunding campaign. They are also locally based and partnered with the State of Michigan. Detroit143 took on the task of leading the event, providing marketing consulting and direct sales that helped to raise \$10,450 in the summer campaign. While the fundraising removed our focus and our remaining ad budget from the the New Center location, we collectively decided that the priority was to ensure the continuing, profitable operation of both locations.



PHOTO OF THE SUPREMES COURTESY OF THE DETROIT NEWS

One of the four posters created to promote the “Taking Charge of Our Story” event at Wayne State University in 2010.

In October, 2015, rough calculations based on the café’s rudimentary bookkeeping showed good progress driven by our marketing programs. Despite the extremely harsh winter weather of 2014-15, average monthly revenue from January 1 through September 5, 2015 was 58.82% higher than in 2014. The business had gone from a small loss in 2014 to a projected operating profit (based on the run-rate for the first 244 days of the year) of just under \$40,000. The cash that the owners were able to realize from the business had roughly doubled. In addition, after using a local grant to buy a coffee roaster, Jordi and Melissa were able to make a deal with a coffee grower in rural Mexico to buy the complete output of his fields. So the marketing investment in Detroit had not only grown a neighborhood café, it had also benefitted another small business in Mexico.

Equally important, Jordi and Melissa have both volunteered that they fully understand and appreciate the value of the marketing we have done for them. In the future, they have said, they intend to create a marketing budget for the café and to continue to employ Detroit143 Agency’s long-time contractor Amanda Lewan as a source of freelance marketing strategy and support. This confirms what we expected:

If we can show small business people the impact of low-cost, multi-channel marketing, they will take a small piece of their increased revenue and devote it to paying for the marketing themselves. This points the way to a future version of Detroit143 that is at least partially self-funding after two to three years in operation.

We intend to leave Jordi and Melissa with detailed numbers and insights into the best way to market their business. Jordi and his staff have received significant training and consulting. Jordi is aware now of the importance of events, community outreach, and how social media marketing can support his business. We hope this knowledge proves invaluable as he aims to sign a five-year lease maintaining his presence in New Center and continuing to stabilize and grow his Southwest Detroit location.

“The business had gone from a small loss in 2014 to a projected operating profit... of just under \$40,000.”

WRAP-UP

OUR WORK WITH DETROIT143 over the past several years has underlined the important role for both journalism and marketing that is consequential at the neighborhood level. We've made modest progress toward the sustainability of such work (our lead client has indicated a willingness to spend up to \$500 per month to continue the marketing services provided without charge via our Kresge grant).

But we also acknowledge that our work, to date, has failed to illuminate a path to full sustainability. This has been the result faced by the vast majority of start-up local news initiatives in recent years. With well informed local residents and profitable neighborhood businesses essential to vibrant community life, a stark question arises: How might this work be carried on, supported and improved?

News organizations traditionally viewed advertising as a path to profitability as opposed to an essential community service. Digital realities at the community level suggest a new approach: Advertising (in various forms of marketing support) can generate a share of a community news organization's revenues but there's something else just as crucial at stake: Helping small businesses grow their own revenues in ways that keep them in business (serving the community) and providing jobs and tax revenues at the same time.

As much as partnerships with established media can be helpful to community news initiatives, it's unrealistic to think that these metro newspapers and broadcast news outlets will serve the needs of small communities within their markets. Their business models are simply too broken. We also recognize that these are not services appropriately delivered or funded by government. And as essential as foundations have been in sparking and encouraging the sort of innovative work we accomplished with Detroit143, we also recognize that foundations are less interested in funding ongoing operations.

We believe the best hope for ongoing funding for this work lies in the roots of the consequential approach we've taken to both the journalism and the marketing.

In concrete terms, that means securing a partnership with an organization whose objectives align closely enough with ours that funding Detroit143 or an initiative like it would make practical sense for both.

An example of the sort of organization we mean is [Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America \(NACA\)](#), a non-profit that describes its goals as "economic justice, neighborhood stabilization and community advocacy."

With 2.3 million members around the country, NACA has provided low-interest mortgages to low and moderate income home buyers for 30 years. NACA is expected to play a major role in addressing one of the most pressing challenges in the revitalization of Detroit's neighborhoods: financing increased home ownership.

NACA CEO AND FOUNDER BRUCE MARKS approached us to explore how a news and networking operation could serve NACA's constituents, not only in Detroit, but in other cities where NACA is active as well. It's too soon to know what will come of these talks, but the conversations have surfaced several critical points:

- Revenue-producing organizations like NACA will be increasingly interested in aligning themselves with the sort of content creation and marketing that will help neighborhoods survive and thrive.
- Forging those kinds of alliances will require some new wrinkles in journalistic traditions. A news and marketing operation funded by NACA (or some other company or organization) will not operate with the same independence typically associated with journalistic enterprises. Nonetheless, we believe that fact-based reporting sponsored by an organization with compatible values can play a major role in sustaining community life.
- Transparency, increasingly valued in journalism's digital era, will become even more important as journalists find new partners to secure the financial sustainability of local news.

We thank Knight and Kresge for helping us achieve what we have so far, and look forward to future collaboration.