



## COMMUNITY PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

### **A Red Circle: Helping to Restore North County St. Louis**

*By Paula Miller, UMSL graduate student*

This month's feature is UMSL community partner, A Red Circle and an interview with Founder/Executive Director Erica Williams.

Recently celebrating its 4-year anniversary, A Red Circle's mission statement is, "The holistic betterment of our community; reversing the effects of racism, one person and cause at a time...because all blood is red." Their focus is on restoring North County to a safe, vibrant, sustainable, and economically sound community that remains diverse. This collaborative organization advocates and develops holistic initiatives for the betterment of all. "A Red Circle exists in North St. Louis County to promote community betterment through healthy food access, education, justice, civic engagement, and the arts. All of our work is conducted through a racial equity lens in collaboration with the community," according to Erica Williams, the organizations Founder and Executive Director.

The nonprofit organization provides multi-dimensional, equitable community services throughout North County. Programming includes the STL Mutual Aid-North County Pod, Education Justice and Support, Healthy Food Access, Civic Engagement & Policy, and The Arts. Program efforts are connected. For example, the organization encourages projects like Art in the Garden connecting it to nutrition. They also partner with the UMSL School of Social Work food forest program.

For education, the organization collaborates with area partners to host an Education Advocacy Coalition which meets quarterly to strengthen supports for area students. Activities currently include virtual tutoring, virtual parent cafés, and other educational programs. "We provide for short-term needs such as food and supplies, and we advocate for long-term needs such as healthy food access and education justice for our students in grades K through 12," noted Williams.

A Red Circle also is a sponsor of the "good food movement." This movement attempts to bridge the gap in local "good food"/fresh food access. It advocates for individuals to grow their own food with education and career opportunities, and it supports having full-service local grocers in North County. Thus, A Red Circle promotes equitable programs for good health and wellness as well as career advancement opportunities for the community. "Good Food Justice" is how Williams describes it. Good food justice involves having equitable access to fresh food within your community, receiving education on "good food" production through gardening, and having access to local full-service grocers with fresh produce.

"This food justice is racial justice because oftentimes in predominantly African-American and low-income areas there's an absence of good food which was done deliberately. Good food brings good bodies and it also brings good jobs to communities. When communities that are predominantly African-American lack these things, it is hard to get jobs, it is hard to stay healthy, and it is hard to flourish as a community," stressed the Founder. It's all interrelated. Williams also pointed out A Red Circle's

advocacy efforts on the importance of voting and noted that, “Food system work is made easier when residents are engaged as citizens.”

As a part of helping North St. Louis County flourish, A Red Circle is offering a 2021 Food & Justice Fellowship which supports a cohort of Fellows and other urban growers in North St. Louis County to learn about food production, agribusiness, food justice, and other food business topics. This is the first year for the Fellowship and, in addition to participating, Fellows will help A Red Circle develop the curriculum for the future.

A Red Circle is looking for volunteers and investors to assist in restoring North County to a more thriving, viable community. For more information on the organization, projects and educational opportunities, visit [www.aredcircle.org](http://www.aredcircle.org), call (314) 328-2286, or send an email to [erica.williams@aredcircle.org](mailto:erica.williams@aredcircle.org).



Photo by A Red Circle - Erica Williams, A Red Circle, Founder and Executive Director (in center)