

# West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA) Outdoor Classroom

IDENTIFY SOURCES OF  
FUNDING TO FUND YOUR  
PARTNERS EVERY STEP OF THE  
WAY & EXPLORE POTENTIAL  
COLLABORATIONS & PLAN A  
PROJECT TOGETHER

***This case study focuses the use of Georgia Tech's Vertically Integrated Project (VIP) to support the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA) by designing an outdoor classroom that fosters community engagement, environmental education, and the integration of Afro-futurist principles.***

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This VIP stemmed from a conversation between Jenny Hirsch, SCoRE's Senior Director and a co-instructor of our undergraduate research course, Building for Equity and Sustainability, and Darryl Haddock, Special Projects Director at West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA), which has been a close partner of SCoRE for many years. Darryl proposed the idea of constructing an outdoor classroom at WAWA's Outdoor Activity Center (OAC), a 22-acre old growth forest, in response to Jenny's invitation to Darryl to join the course as a community partner. The course was looking for partners who were interested in working on a project to connect their residents to the Kendeda Building for Innovative Sustainable Design, which is the first Living Building in the Southeastern U.S. In Fall 2022, the first semester of working on the project, the team worked on conceptualizing what the outdoor classroom would look like.



VIP students visit outdoor classroom site

The VIP is focused on Georgia Tech's Kendeda Building and how its principles could be applied and connected to the outdoor classroom. This also brought up the question of how Georgia Tech could be an accessible community resource to those around WAWA (the Bush Mountain and Oakland City communities). These considerations and WAWA's input led the students to focus on an overarching Afro-futurist theme for the design and guiding principles of the project.

Afro-futurism is a movement and a cultural aesthetic that draws on science fiction, history, and fantasy to help envision a future of hope and self-determination for African Americans and their communities. Bush Mountain community members wanted this project to be a symbol of their future. The Outdoor Classroom has seen many design iterations, starting with multiple classrooms and then evolving to focus on a single stage, finally, ending with a lean-to design for one structure. These iterations were created through multiple conversations and workshops involving VIP students, WAWA staff, and some community members.

The VIP students are also advised by construction and architecture industry partners who are GT Faculty and alumni. VIP students and WAWA staff created mood boards that informed important design elements like materials, color, and programming, and the VIP students and industry advisors created preliminary designs that were based off of these mood boards. The VIP students

then took the designs to WAWA and received input from staff and community members through surveys and interactive posters. Based on the input, students altered the design. The design was finalized in Fall 2023 and a budget was created. The design implements Afro-futurist design elements and prioritizes utilizing reused materials. Construction will start in 2025 and will be a community effort involving the students, WAWA staff, Bush Mountain community members, industry sponsors, and our GT and advisers' network. The build days will be opportunities for socializing and learning as we all come together to construct the Outdoor Classroom. In addition to the Outdoor Classroom, the VIP is working with WAWA on preserving the history of the OAC and stewardship in the neighborhood.

A "Placekeeping" student team is using previously collected oral histories from former WAWA interns and Spelman alumni. The audios were collected from Bush Mountain community elders and WAWA staff and told the stories of those who stewarded the land. In order to preserve and share these stories, the Placekeeping team listened to the audio recordings, edited them, and assigned them to different themes to be shared through NFC tags. The NFC tags will be used as part of an outdoor museum and self-guided tour that will celebrate and share the history of the land, and will be placed along themed trails throughout the forest for visitors to interact with and learn about the history of the land they are visiting. NFC tags are accessible technology that store data that can be viewed with a device. This allows visitors to easily access the audios and allows staff to update the tags as they collect and preserve more stories. This project is now a part of WAWA's celebration of the OAC's 50th Anniversary in 2025.

## LESSON LEARNED

"Although faculty and researchers are experts in their field, it is important to recognize the expertise of community partners. Community partners are experts in many fields and are often overlooked by institutions as simply being representatives of their communities. Although they are experts in serving their communities, many community partners have skill sets and knowledge that extend to academic fields. I have consulted community partners on pedagogical methods, ecological research, and government/policy. So when approaching community partners with research, consider these community partners as possible fellow researchers rather than just people who serve their community."

## DONATE TO OUR OUTDOOR CLASSROOM!



## WE NEED YOUR HELP!

Flyer used in the fundraising process which shows a rendering of the outdoor classroom

## Principles in Action

- » *B3 – Transparency:* Openly discuss funding, be transparent about all aspects of the budget, and work to funnel as much funding as possible to community partners.
- » *D2 - Mutuality:* Listen to each other, come up with ideas together that build on mutual areas of interest and expertise - and then start planning.
- » *E2 - Sustainable Outcomes:* Design project outcomes that will continue to support the community's vision for the future after the project ends.

Each phase of this project was done in collaboration with WAWA staff and community members, with the most collaboration during the design phase. WAWA staff knew what the community needed and wished to see, which is why the idea of an outdoor classroom was brought up in the conversation between Jenny Hirsch and Darryl Haddock. The VIP team relies on WAWA staff for their experience and relationships with residents and other community organizations, as well as their knowledge of the land and its history.

The project's budget is available online on our fundraising page as a live document to guarantee transparency and create trust with the community and other donors. In addition, our fundraising goal matches the budget, indicating that all funds will go towards the

project, WAWA, and the community (and not to Georgia Tech). Our main challenges came with determining how we could fundraise from the community to ensure the community has a sense of ownership of the project. As we put together the fundraising plan with WAWA staff, we were able to figure out what percentage of the budget is realistic to fundraise from the community and then also include a process for recruiting communities as volunteers for the build days, which also garners a sense of ownership in the project. Through this collaborative process, the students learned that donations of time and hard work are equally as valuable as monetary donations.

Although it might seem like the project would end once the Outdoor Classroom is built, our team is building continual support and connection. We are recruiting GT students and organizations to utilize the Outdoor Classroom to teach students at WAWA's summer camps, bring Bush Mountain community members to campus for Kendeda Building tours, and support any other educational programming that WAWA's Environmental Education team implements. In addition, our team has included the cost of maintenance (materials and labor) in the budget to ensure the periodic upkeep of the structure. Finally, our design team is designing a wall panel system that allows community members and WAWA staff to change how they use the Outdoor Classroom as the organization and its goals grow.

#### **Related Resources:**

- [Building Community Capacity: A Definitional Framework and Case Studies from a Comprehensive Community Initiative](#)
- [The Place of Community in Social Work Practice Research: Conceptual and Methodological Developments](#)
- [Equity Petal: When Is a Ramp Not Just a Ramp?](#)
- [A 'living Building' in the Heart of Georgia Tech's University Campus](#)