



Realizing Meaning, Dignity,
& Community *in the South*
2025

What does a thriving South look like *to you?*

Use this space to brainstorm, draw, and explore.

Welcome to STATE SOUTH

MDC's premier publication, the *State of the South*[™], began in 1996 as a report on the economic conditions and demographic trends affecting the South. Over time, the report's influence grew, helping shape the priorities of nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, and elected leaders throughout the region.

Today, we are excited to present you with a new model for *State of the South*. Our 2025 report is a testament to the

vital conversations shaping our region's future. It highlights remarkable leaders driving change in their communities and MDC's efforts to build an equitable and inclusive South. Moreover, it recognizes the transformative power of art in reimagining the South we aspire to. This report is a clear-eyed assessment of the work ahead and a powerful reminder that the South's true strength comes from its people—all of us, forging a future imbued with **meaning, dignity, and community.**

View the full report at report.stateofthesouth.org/



Credit: Zheng Chia

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. . . It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. That is easier said than done.

Ella Baker



Ella Baker was a visionary behind-the-scenes organizer in the Civil Rights movement in the South and New York City.

Ella Baker portrait by Robert Shetterly courtesy of Americans Who Tell the Truth, www.americanswhotellthetruth.org.

Realizing Meaning, Dignity, and Community *in the South*

In the summer of 2022, MDC engaged a team of staff and partners to redesign our *State of the South* report into a series of community-driven convenings. We asked ourselves: *What would our communities look and feel like if equity were a shared Southern value, much like hospitality?*

We talked about the sense of safety that each person would feel. We spoke about the ease that comes from financial security and the comfort of knowing that everyone's needs are met within the community. All our answers pointed to a sense of care and shared prosperity that every person throughout all our communities would feel. We all agreed: **Every Southerner deserves a life of meaning, dignity, and community.**



*State of the South: Central
Appalachia, 2023*



Credit: Erica Chambers Photography

We know that achieving our vision won't be easy.

It will take targeted interventions to remedy the vast racial and economic inequities that stem from harmful policies and long-standing disinvestment rooted in racism. We cannot assume equity will be an outcome; instead, we must intentionally design systems to produce the equitable outcomes we wish to see.



State of the South: Atlanta, 2024
Credit: Zheng Chia

We know it will require *collective* *effort.*

That's why MDC spent two years – 2022 to 2024 – gathering folks in Durham, N.C.; Berea, Ky.; Birmingham, Al.; Charleston, S.C.; and Atlanta, Ga., to discuss pressing issues of equity and economic mobility throughout the South. We infused the arts into every convening. Music, spoken word poetry, dance, and the visual arts provided a way for participants to connect, make meaning of data, and imagine an equitable future for the region.

Through hard conversations, we witnessed beauty and resilience.



State of the South: Central Appalachia, 2023
Credit: Erica Chambers Photography

We saw the power of people supporting each other in times of crisis, resisting oppressive systems, and advocating for equitable solutions that would transform outcomes for millions of Southerners. What emerged was a powerful mosaic of voices organizing for change.

We present you with a small piece of this mosaic in our 2025 *State of the South* Report:

**“Realizing Meaning,
Dignity, and Community
in the South”**



We invite you to view the full report here:

report.stateofthesouth.org/

Meaning

mean·ing (noun)



Southerners' ability to envision and *shape their own best futures*

We make hundreds of decisions every day. Some choices, like working or doing chores, feel less like choices and more like obligations. Other choices, like spending time with loved ones or pursuing hobbies, we make purely for joy and fulfillment. What matters most is that we get to *choose*.

mean•ing

The economic security that grants Southerners the ability to envision and choose the future they want for themselves is a dream for many and a luxury for few. Without economic stability, Southerners' time and autonomy is consumed with securing basic needs instead of pursuing risks like starting a business or going to college.

As MDC convened communities throughout the South, several themes emerged: we heard how stable and affordable housing, quality education, access to healthcare, safe lending practices, and a manageable level of debt create the conditions for Southerners to thrive. When these ingredients are securely in place, individuals have the opportunity to imagine different futures, consider new ideas and ventures, and take steps to realize their dreams.

“Every year, there seems to be a new statistic that confirms what impacted communities already know to be true: the economy isn’t working for them.”

- from “Income and Wealth for All: The Foundation for a Just Economy,” by Hope Wollensack and Amit Khanduri

We invite you to explore the stories and fact sheets in this section:

- In “Income and Wealth for All,” Hope Wollensack and Amit Khanduri of Georgia Resilience and Opportunity (GRO) Fund describe how programs like guaranteed income and Baby Bonds provide immediate financial support and long-term wealth-building opportunities that are critical to **closing the vast racial wealth gap in the South**.
- Craig Logan, Executive Housing Fellow at the Charleston Metro Chamber of Commerce, reflects on how **safe, stable, and affordable housing** can foster a sense of belonging, support personal growth, and cultivate community connections.
- Jenny Fine, a visual artist and teacher living and working in New Brockton, Alabama, shares the **devastating consequences of inadequate healthcare access in Alabama**. Her experience underscores how systemic barriers contribute to preventable suffering and death in our region.
- Reporter Grace Vitaglione looks at research from MDC and others to understand the **burden of student loan debt for Black women in North Carolina** in a 2023 story published by Carolina Public Press.



State of the South: Closing the Healthcare Coverage Gap in Alabama, 2023

Credit: Charity Rachelle

Scenes from the *South*

Images from MDC's *State of the South* convenings, 2022-2024



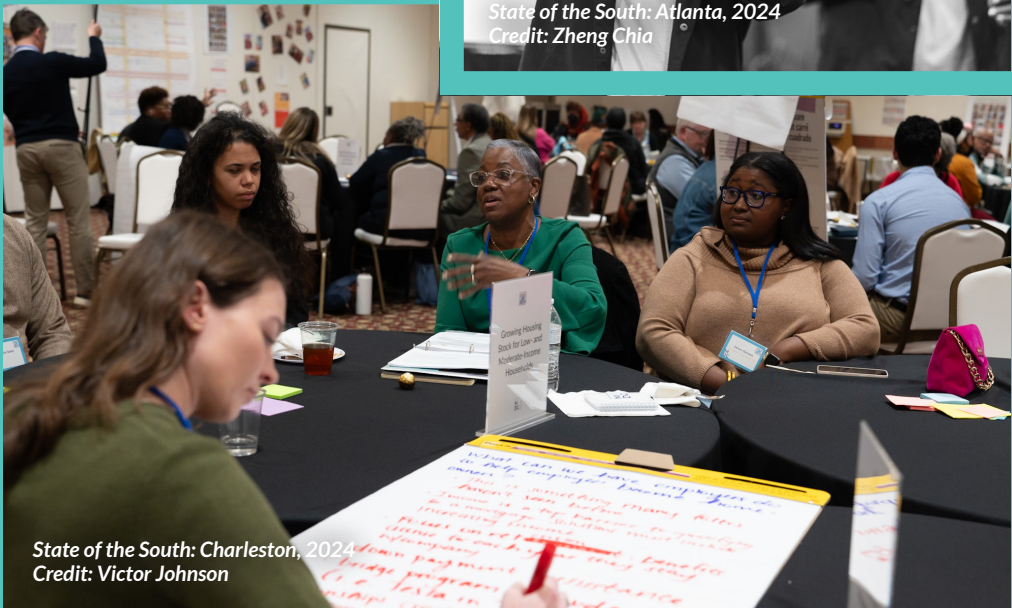
State of the South: Central Appalachia, 2023
Credit: Erica Chambers Photography



State of the South: Atlanta, 2024
Credit: Zheng Chia



State of the South: Atlanta, 2024
Credit: Zheng Chia



State of the South: Charleston, 2024
Credit: Victor Johnson

Dignity

dig·ni·ty (noun)



The sense of respect and value Southerners experience
*in all the places they live,
learn, and work*

As human beings, we all have inherent dignity. Yet, our understanding of self-worth is highly influenced by how people and institutions treat us, including our employers. Dignity at work is achieved through the sum of competitive wages and benefits, professional growth opportunities, respectful treatment, workplace safety, and worker empowerment.



State of the South: Charleston, 2024
Credit: Victor Johnson

dig·ni·ty

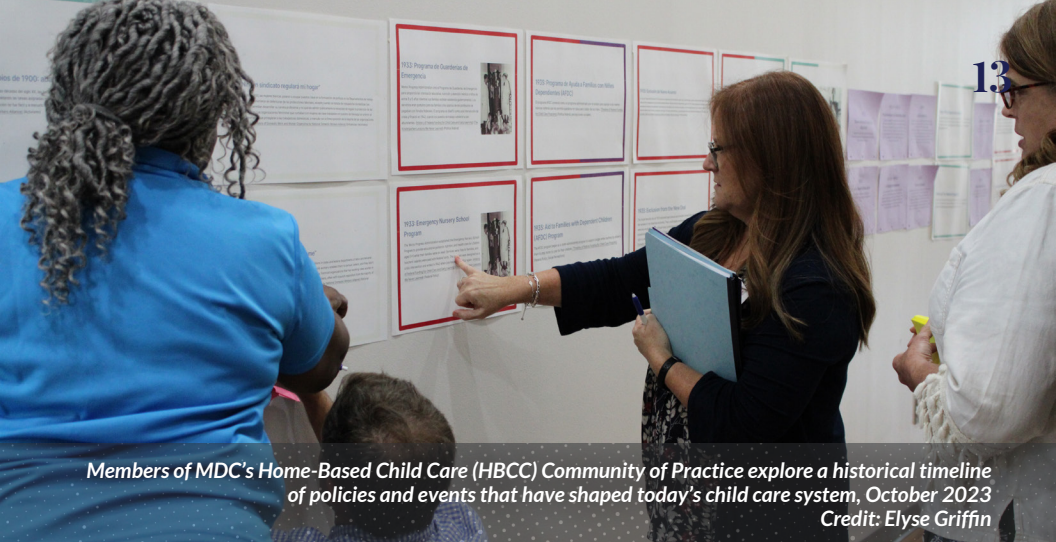
In an economy that recognizes the inherent dignity of all people, pay and inclusion must be prioritized. The key to ensuring diverse and inclusive economic development and wealth-building opportunities is to create workplace and entrepreneurial environments in which immigrants, people of color, and others who face explicit and implicit bias in the workplace feel welcome.



We can and must do better by broadening the conversation to include fair wages, humane conditions, and the well-being of these essential workers who are integral to the very systems we depend on. It is only then that we can build an economy that values human dignity as much as the products we consume.

- from "Economic Growth through Exploitation,"
by Gilda Pedraza

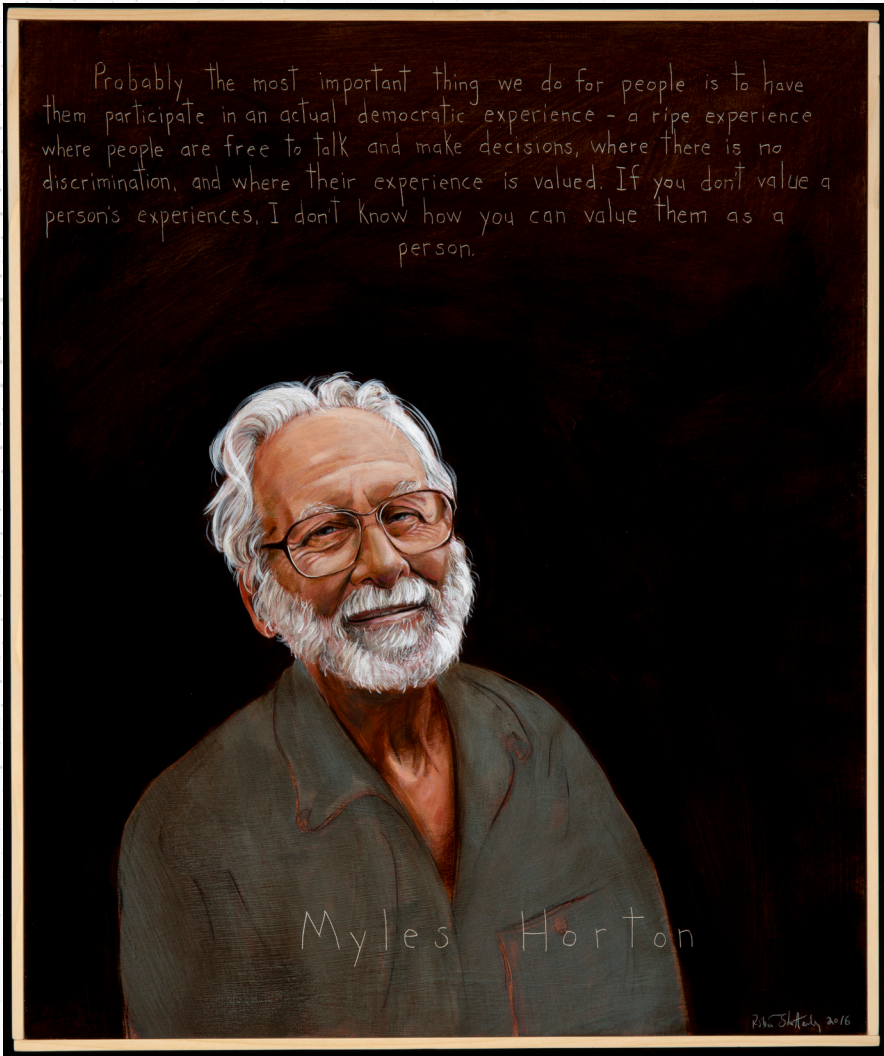




Members of MDC's Home-Based Child Care (HBCC) Community of Practice explore a historical timeline of policies and events that have shaped today's child care system, October 2023
Credit: Elyse Griffin

Stories in this section call for bold leadership and transformative solutions to ensure dignity for all Southern workers:

- Gilda (Gigi) Pedraza, Executive Director and Founder of Latino Community Fund Georgia, gives voice to thousands of Georgia's Hispanic/Latine farmworkers in **"Economic Growth through Exploitation."** These workers produce our food, pay taxes, and contribute to our communities, yet our economic systems continue to exclude and exploit them.
- Peter Hille, Chief Executive Officer of Mountain Association, lends insight to the history of coal production in Appalachia, how its promise was never fully realized, and how rural communities must invest in diverse businesses and quality of life to **rebuild economies that work for everyone.**
- Members of MDC's Educational Equity team **amplify the voices of home-based child care providers** in their call for fair treatment and compensation within a system that does not fully recognize their worth.

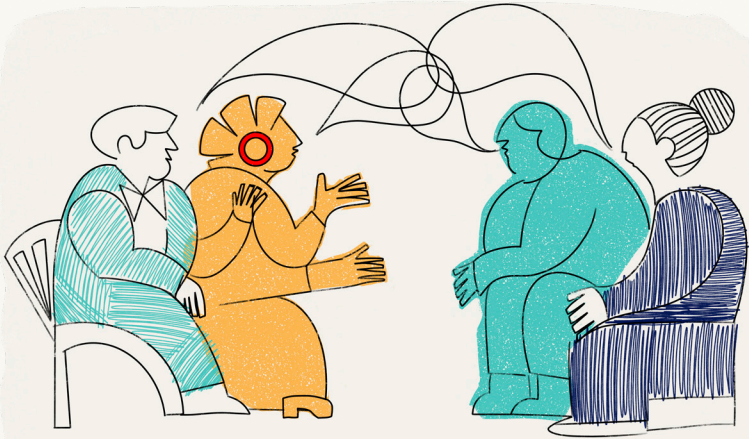


Myles Horton founded the Highlander Folk School in east Tennessee in 1932. The school has provided social justice training to countless leaders throughout the South and beyond.

Myles Horton portrait by Robert Shetterly courtesy of Americans Who Tell the Truth, www.americanswhotellthetruth.org.

Community

com·mu·ni·ty (noun)



Southerners' sense of connection, collaboration, and *equitable voice in decision-making*

Being Southern is both comforting and complex. We take pride in where we're from and who our people are, yet we're surrounded by cultural narratives, landmarks, and political rhetoric that falsely tell us who belongs here and who doesn't. These messages aren't just symbolic: they're a tool used to determine who thrives and who merely survives in the South.

com•mu•ni•ty

Narratives of belonging are continually reinforced by policy decisions that grant fewer resources and protections to low-income people, people of color, and other marginalized communities. One example is our regressive tax system that requires lower-income residents to pay a disproportionately higher percentage of their income in taxes compared to wealthier individuals. Another example is historic redlining practices, which left a legacy of concentrated poverty, underfunded schools, and limited economic opportunity in communities of color.

A common thread emerged across our *State of the South* gatherings: people deserve to have a voice in decisions that affect them. Otherwise, communities risk ongoing exclusion and extraction.

In this section, authors share how communities are organizing – and institutions are responding – to ensure that all Southerners can participate in shaping the future of our region:

- **“Equitable Community Engagement: The First Step to Doing Good in the Public Sector,”** written by members of MDC’s Rural Prosperity and Investment team, shares lessons about disrupting a legacy of discrimination and bias in the public sector by overcoming institutional hesitancy to confront inequities.



- Dr. Jonathan C. Augustine, Senior Pastor of St. Joseph AME Church (Durham, N.C.) and faculty member at the Hampton University School of Religion, argues that Christian nationalism and the Great Replacement Theory pose the greatest domestic threat to democracy, particularly in the South. To counteract this ideology, we must **embrace a culture of belonging**.
- Giany Guedjo, Jovonia Lewis, ReZsaun Lewis, and Angela McDuffie, **four alumni of MDC's Investing in Leaders of Color (ILOC) program**, offer ideas for how funders can work collaboratively with leaders of color to make more equitable and impactful investments in communities of color.



“Funders must move beyond traditional funding models and adopt a more collaborative and equitable approach to be effective partners with leaders of color. Relationship building, networking, and authentic engagement are pathways to transformative change.”

- from “To Invest in Leaders of Color - A Reflection,” by Giany Guedjo, Jovonia Lewis, ReZsaun Lewis, and Angela McDuffie



Investing in Leaders of Color (ILOC) Fellows at the program launch in 2022.

In the wake of *Famal Sutherland*

*By: A\$iahMae, Poet Laureate of Charleston,
S.C.*

Before there is a movement
There is a moment
A hurried heart
Rapid inhale
Intuition punch to the pit of your stomach
A minute, molecular rapture
The moment before the bow breaks
Before the bile backed rage teetering on the cup of your
tongue spills over your teeth
Before the stress pooling in the small of your back
Forms ocean currents too strong to swim through
Before the wails and sirens become anguish songs for
mothers too tired to sing

This isn't a moment before just anything
This is the moment before the action
The moment before you move
This is the moment you decide
How tired are you of being tired?
How much are you willing to lose?

*Performed by A\$iahMae at State of the South:
Charleston, 2024*



Call to Action: Let's Build a *Thriving South Together*

Our call to action presents a foundational set of recommendations grounded in our shared commitment to equity, inclusiveness, and the opportunity for all Southerners to thrive. This is a starting point; we recognize it is incomplete. We look forward to engaging leaders, researchers, and those with lived expertise to deepen our understanding and advocacy for the issues that create a South where everyone can thrive.

To transform key systems that perpetuate inequality and exclusion, we must take action to:

- Improve housing security and affordability;
- Stabilize income and eliminate predatory debt;
- Expand Medicaid;
- Invest in equitable education systems;
- Protect workers;
- Adopt inclusive community economic development and decision-making strategies;
- Address historical inequities in philanthropy; and
- Engage artists to infuse collective problem-solving with empathy and creativity.



For a detailed list of recommendations, we invite you to explore the full 2025 *State of the South Report* at report.stateofthesouth.org/, featuring the voices of Southern artists, leaders, and community members.



Graphic recording of MDC's State of the South: Durham convening, October 2022. Art by A Visual Approach

EQUITABLE economic DEVELOPMENT

Imagination takes us beyond reality. What about radical imagination?

TRAIN PEOPLE RESOURCE NEW WAYS

Surely we can shape the state South

history community art ALEXANDRA ZAGBAYOU

What conditions are necessary for radical imagination?

COLLECTIVE ALIGNMENT

we are the 24th STATE JOHNNY LEE CHAPMAN III

Honoring a place's history begins with presence.

Native culture is alive on this land.

How do we move forward while honoring our history?

ANITA BROWN-GRAHAM

JOHNNY CHAPMAN III

KATE PEARCE

We can change the narratives. The vote is an instrument of power. Make a new table.

COMMUNITY CELEBRATION ART

JOY + CELEBRATION GOOD MEDICINE HEALING SPACE DIX PARK HEALING TRUTH

LEARN THE STORY

BORDER TWO OF TERRITORIES

PAIN + TRAUMA JOY + HEALING

THE TRANSFORMATION OF DIX PARK PAST + FUTURE

We need conversation across lines of difference.

to move the south forward

the beginning of a new South

State of the South NOW

We need to tell the story of the true south.

navel & backbone doing the belly rub

INFORM BROADER KNOWLEDGE FURTHER OUR THINKING BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

CHALLENGE YOUR MIND

POINT A WAY FORWARD

SPEAK TO THE PEOPLE

MAKING REALITY ABOUT THE SOUTH with DATA

FERREL GUILLORY, UNC



ART BY A VISUAL APPROACH



Acknowledgements

The 2025 *State of the South* report was completed and made possible because of the contributions, support, and expertise of many individuals and organizations.

With heartfelt gratitude, we acknowledge the community members, artists, and leaders of Atlanta, Georgia; Berea, Kentucky; Central Appalachia; Birmingham, Alabama; Charleston, South Carolina; and Durham, North Carolina. Your voices and truths are the foundation of this report, inspiring us with possibilities for a thriving South.

We extend our sincere thanks to John Simpkins, MDC President and CEO, for his renewed vision for *State of the South*, and Karim Baer, 2022-2024 *State of the South* Director, for his leadership of the program. We are immensely grateful to team members Clarissa Goodlett, Daniel Bradford, Kristin Feierabend, Jenna Bryant, Rebecca Hall, Nina Rivers, and Simon Palmore whose collaboration, creativity, and coordination brought this dynamic program and report to life.

Thank you to our many funders and thought partners whose support made this possible.

Original cover art and Meaning, Dignity, Community illustrations by Antonio Alanís.



Credit: Zheng Chia

MDC envisions a South *where all people thrive.*

We strengthen community capacity, foster collaboration, and build influence to challenge systemic inequities for an equitable and inclusive South.



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