

## **The Fighter League *A Collaborative-based Leadership Investment Program***

**\*\*\*Details of participants and collaboratives removed for privacy reasons\*\*\***

### **I. About**

The Fighter League pilot program (Fighter League) was born on a simple premise to invest in community leaders differently to allow them to rest, heal, recover, and grow. This was designed through an intentional participatory process, with respect and understanding that leaders know what they need, have answers they are seeking, or hold the right questions they need to answer to move forward. Leaders, more than anything, need time to discern, space to heal, investment in their capacities, and partnerships to deepen their work in accountability to the greater whole.

We do face a challenge in funding at the nexus of leadership and the climate crisis at the moment. Most leadership programs tend to focus on *individual* skill development outside of the collective community process. While most climate and energy funding that moves towards *collaboratives, networks, and coalitions*, focus on policy and narrative goals, but bypass leadership restoration, growth, or accountability.

The Fighter League sought to thread a needle between both of these strategies by moving resources to deepen capacity of leaders working on the frontlines of the energy transition and climate crisis, while investing in the collective work of a collaborative or organization, as a whole.

We believe that the model of this leadership investment is the right one in this current moment. We face a climate crisis that continues to accelerate. We are witnessing increasing climate disasters, displacement, economic inequity, health epidemics, and energy burdens. The fight for a just and equitable transition to a regenerative and renewable energy economy that is holistic and intersects with fights for justice around land, food systems, healthy housing, mass incarceration, education, and transportation is critical. Frontline communities have borne the brunt of the climate and economic disasters, yet also hold the solutions and keys for us moving forward. The challenge, quite often, is that the leadership in these communities have been harmed, overburdened, and disinvested. As is the case of many communities around the world - the leaders that are most often burdened identify as Black, Brown, Indigenous and women. Now is the time to invest in these leaders health, wellbeing, and the collective work.

The Fighter League is a collaborative effort among the following:

- Sarah Shanley Hope and Rudi Navarra of the Solutions Project
- Taj James, Movement Strategy Center
- Rosa Gonzalez Facilitating Power
- Anthony Giancatarino, Just Community Energy Transition Project.

The pilot was funded by the Surdna Foundation, Kresge Foundation, and Northlight Foundation.

## II. Overview of the Pilot Program

The Fighter League pilot program focused on the Gulf South as it is ground zero of the climate and economic disasters in our country, yet is a region with deep history, and current practice, of building anti-racist solutions for our country. Despite the boom and bust cycles of disaster philanthropy in the region, there are three strong collaboratives that have moved forward the struggles for justice with very little resources. We asked - imagine the possibilities if these collaboratives had significant investment in their leaders?

Though we did not have the level of resources we hoped, the Fighter League pilot program provided the following:

- \$20,000 to three different collectives/collaboratives (six participants received \$10,000 each);
- Connected each leader to a tailored mentor from outside of their region;
- Provided media support and recognition in local communities;
- and facilitated restorative and relationship-building retreat.

Leaders were selected by each collective's own decision-making process and the resources were utilized as they each saw fit to deepen their leadership; create space for repair and recover from harm and burn-out; and help leaders identify strategic spaces for radical collaboration within their community that is necessary to take the next step in the movement for a just energy transition.

## III. A Participatory Design Process

The Fighter League concept evolved over time through multiple iterative processes and planning efforts. The critical point behind the design was that the leadership program be participatory from the start. In the fight around climate and energy systems, so many of the proposed community solutions are rooted in self-determination and collective governance. We sought to model this in our own design process in the following ways:

- **Phase I: Concept Development.** In this phase, we interviewed and talked with dozens of leaders from a variety of communities and networks across the country about what needs and investments their communities have for leadership. We scanned different leadership models and programs to see if any program matched the needs identified. The biggest needs identified were:
  - Rest and recovery;
  - Deepening leadership skills of emergent leaders - not just executives or leaders who have established resources;
  - Ensuring that there is a feedback loop between individual leadership investment and the greater collective;
  - Flexibility and self-determination should be valued;
  - And a desire to have the time to tackle an emergent idea or pressing challenge.

While there are programs such as Windcall Institute and Roddenberry Fellowship that address some of these goals, we found that even with these existing programs there is not enough resource investments towards leadership development of this kind - particularly through an accountability to community approach.

- **Phase II: Groundtruthing and Landscape Mapping.** After the concept development, we tested the idea with existing leaders, elders, and emergent leaders from different collectives, collaboratives, and networks to refine the concept, test our blindspots, and to identify potential places of focus. Of particular note, in this phase we clarified whether this program should be implemented nationally through a theme or if we should focus more regionally. This process resulted in identifying the Gulf South as the most critical place to pilot the program.
- **Phase III: Regional Engagement and Concept Refinement.** We shared the concept and engaged with regional leaders and networks with members in the Gulf South with transparency that funding was not yet guaranteed. In this process, we refined goals of the Fighter League, identified the collaboratives/collectives that were the most “ripe” for investment and sought the necessary funding to move the project. The three collaboratives that we engaged are intersectional collaboratives that are led-by and center, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and feminist leadership, and blend energy fights with arts, culture, organizing, policy, among others.
- **Phase IV: Selection Process.** Rather than inviting individuals to apply, *we invited the three collaboratives* to apply. Each collaborative utilized their own process to nominate two members to represent them in the Fighter League. The intention behind this was to avoid replicating bad processes that elevate individual leaders but not the multitude of leaders in a space, or dictates top-down processes to others. We hoped that this would allow us to invest in spaces of emergent collaboration and support two leaders within that collaboration. The intention for the selection process was to allow the collaboratives and individuals work together in shaping and defining individual leadership skills, deepen ecosystem mapping, and show how this leadership investment is also investing in the community and collaborative. This process also respected each collective’s own internal process, rather than force something from above.
- **Phase V: Program Implementation.** Participants shaped *their own path* within the program and clarified how their vision and purpose for participating matched each of their collectives goals. Participants also identified how their purpose connects to the greater movement ecosystem as well as hone transformative personal narratives to accelerate a just transition. The Fighter League participants went through the following:
  - **A self-mapping process.** Ideally, this was done in conversation with their collectives/collaboratives. Participants engaged in questions around trauma and healing; identified how leaders can enter into this work as their whole selves; identified skills and growth opportunities; articulated vision and values; identified a problem or idea to generate and seed for radical collaboration; and engaged with lessons learned from the work. (please see *Appendix I*).

- **Used resources to invest in their own leadership capacity.** Participants identified interventions that would allow them to flourish and deepen their leadership and collective growth (examples in the next section). This was uniquely different to each member.
- **Retreat and Relationship growth:** Participants met with a mentor on a monthly basis, shared their work with their collective/collaborative, and attended a retreat with each other and a few leaders and elders to share insights from the stories and leadership work; build together, share stories, create sparks and ideas for change.

#### IV. Details and Outcomes of the Fighter League

*Resource Uses:* The following are ways that participants used their \$10,000:

Collaborative	Leader	Mentor	Project Goals	Use of Funds
			Learning and deepening holistic writing as a form for both healing and communication at the intersection of policy and action to empower people in communities to share tools to help people to stand up and carry on the work.	Support youth projects that also creates a leadership pathway that moves the community away from relying on one person.
			Deepen and grow work at the intersection of healing and artmaking to support personal soul-shifting and integrate arts and healing in a more centered way within the organizing work of Another Gulf is Possible and with their partners and allies.	Participated in an arts-learning exchange in Palestine and attend arts-healing workshops
			Time to do a workplan for what is needed with insights from community to pull together local to global solidarity work, develop training and education programs, and build on confidence and leadership in this work.	Participated in multiple international trips to deepen local to global connections.
			Spending time deepening connections with health assessment survey and climate and energy issues, and building confidence to move research to action.	Created space and time to do research and develop more connections between health and climate crisis and deepen work through Brene Brown classes.

			Deepen learning and exploration at the intersection of food systems, food safety and resilience in disaster recovery and preparation and build out models for community agri-hoods that fight displacement.	Invested in land to fight climate gentrification and build an agri-hood, freeing up resources to implement.
			Deepening youth education and building future leaders in advancing a grounded in Indigenous and nature-based curriculum.	Developed a youth and nature-based curriculum and strategy in Southeast Louisiana.

- **Media placement.** We offered media placement to support public profile of the collaboratives and the leaders.
- **Mentorships.** In conversations with each leader, we identified leaders from different regions who would be a good match based on participant's goals and hopes. Mentors were offered a \$1,000 stipend and engaged participants on a monthly basis offering conversation, insights, practices, and strategies.
- **Retreat:** The final component of the program was a lightly-facilitated retreat to allow for leaders to take actual respite and care from the day-to-day strain and work; support deeper relationships; and provide moments for processing and reflection. We planned the retreat to be outside of the Gulf Coast with the intention that sometimes people need to take a step away from their community and home in order to create enough separation from the ongoing crises and work to breathe. We were fortunate that Juana Alicia Ariza lives half of her time in Merida, Mexico and offered up her community as a place for this retreat. This also allowed the Fighter League participants the ability to see the shared watershed from a different perspective. As with the entire program, the retreat was shaped by participants through a pre-retreat survey. In this survey the goals that leaders wanted to achieve included:
  - Restoration, Relaxation, and Repair;
  - Relationship-building with each other;
  - Authentic and intentional relationship engagement with local activists in the local site.

In meeting these goals, we provided a full three-day retreat as follows:

- **Day One: Rest, Restore, Rejuvenate:** Participants had a choice to explore Merida or take a day trip to Celestun, an eco-preserve along the Gulf of Mexico, that is under threat from pollution and potential off-shore oil drilling. We started and ended the day as an entire community sharing meals and conversation.
- **Day Two: Authentic Relationship Development:** In coordinating with Juana Alicia Ariza and her partner, Tirso Gonzalez, we met with 6 Mayan EJ activists and shared stories while working together in an art-build. The goal of the art-build was to provide Fighter League participants with a new art-skill to bring back, while supporting the Mayan activists in

creating art that can be used for their campaigns. We worked on three particular artistic skills:

- Learning *embroidery* which is both a local tradition of the Mayan people, but also used as acts of resistance;
  - Learning *screenprinting and poster-making* to support a campaign banner of Mayan activists to fight against water contamination by big ag.
  - Creating *poetry* together, turning the spoken word into art form to share the message.
- **Day Three: Relationship-building and Evaluation:** On the final day, we spent the morning through story-telling and evaluation of the entire process. And the afternoon and evening participants explored Merida together.

## V. Evaluation

The following are findings based on an evaluation during the retreat and a follow-up survey.

### Plus/Sun

- Mentors was a great idea and invaluable resource.
- Having mentor on retreat trip is a useful investment.
- Connecting with others who are experiencing similar challenges and interests is refreshing.
- The selection process worked well and respected each collaborative's own way of doing work.
- The retreat was a good space that is safe and healthy for people.
- Focus on the Gulf was smart, as was investing in women leaders.
- Resources were available to do what was needed to do to further the work and create some freedom for us as leaders (sabbatical, or program, etc) - no stipulations on the funds (outside of nothing electoral).
- Glad that we didn't have a lot of programmatic structure, we did not have have capacity for weekly or monthly calls.
- Patience and persistence in implementation.

### Delta/Seeds

- It would have been good to have some connection before end of program retreat, even if it was a Zoom call. Would have been great to have an additional retreat earlier on as well.
- Not everyone felt that they had the most freedom Make do what they wanted with the resources-anything that will support your capacity to the work you are here to do. It would be good to have a little more clear.
- More time to do this work, 6 months is not enough.
- While 4 folks had great mentor-mentee connections, two did not get the best connection with mentor, a little more time needed to really articulate the need that was being addressed to have the

best mentor.

- Know more about the land that we are coming too.

### **Learnings/Sprouts:**

- This program seeded a whole new direction in my life because of investing in self-care.
- This is great to not be grant program, so it would be interesting to consider the next round of resource investment?.
- This process really raised a need for us to figure out how we can protect intellectual property.
- Explore other places for solidarity-building (retreat)

### **Missed Opportunities**

- A chance to connect before the retreat
- Having all the mentors on the retreat
- A chance to communicate to everyone what each other was working on
- A chance to see more of the countryside of Yucatán

## **VI. Learnings and Recommendations**

Based on retreat evaluations and implementation of the Fighter League Pilot, the following are learnings and recommendations for the program moving forward in future design and implementation:

1. There is a deep appreciation for the participatory and intentional process in leadership design, selection process, and implementation and encouraged that this remains critical to future programs.
2. There should be some clear and transparent guidelines for how collaboratives/networks/organizations are invited into the process. Additionally, there should be thinking around how to support emergent leaders who are in some of the most impacted communities in this process.
3. Mentors living outside of region and retreats taking place outside of the region are critically important for perspective, breath, and relationships. It would be worth considering previous participants to play a role as a mentor for future programs (so long as they are in a different region).
4. Mentors should be required (or resourced properly) to attend the retreat. It was optional, but there was a missing opportunity for in-person connection that is valuable.
5. There should be two retreats, one in the beginning of the League and another near the end. This was the original plan, but we had to cut the first retreat due to resource constraints.
6. It would be ideal to build a longer-term relationship with communities where the retreat is held. For example, if the second retreat is in Merida, how can it deepen the relationships formed in the first retreat from movement to movement perspective?.

7. There should be a little more resource support for participants to bring the individual learnings and reflections back to the collective whole. This happened organically, but would have benefited from a little more guidance.
8. There should be a platform for participants to tell their stories of their own leadership and the collective work that they are a part of at the Environmental Grantmakers Association and other funder-affinity meetings and conferences. Not just about their leadership, but to engage in resourcing opportunities for their communities/collectives.
9. There should be a consideration of how to raise resources to really allow people to take time and give the collective/community some programmatic resource support.
10. There should be more integration of resource support that leaders can leverage to build upon their own learning (such as a narrative skills set, etc.).
11. There should be more dedicated resources for staffing and implementing the Fighter League.

## **VII. Appendices**

### **Appendix I: Pre-program Questions**

#### *Collaborative*

1. What is the vision and purpose of your collaboration?
2. What are the organizational anchors and community roots of your collaborative efforts?
3. As a collaborative, what are the bold and radical ideas you are trying to bring into your community?
4. Please describe the collaborative practice of the the team around decisions, other forms of power-sharing, and efforts to advance purpose and vision?
5. As a collaborative, what are most significant challenges of advancing your collective work? Feel free to include relational, systemic, cultural, resource, and/or other spheres of challenge.
6. What do you believe are the movement challenges that constrict the impact of your work?
7. What are the strengths, characteristics or assets that your collaboration possesses?
8. What are the opportunities for growth and learning that your collaboration needs to deepen?
9. What are the gaps or voids in the work that your collaborative aims to fill?



10. Who are you in relationship with?
11. How does your collaborative hold both collaborative interests and those interests of the greater community or whole of our movements?
12. Why is the Fighter League the “right moment of opportunity” for your collaborative?

*Criteria for Identifying the who within*

13. As you think about three people to represent the collaborative in the Fighter League please consider the following questions:
  - a. Who is in a transition moment that is fertile for reflection, amplification, or experimentation?
  - b. Who would or could prioritize space to grapple with the capacities for growth that you have identified as a collaborative?
  - c. Who has identified a creative problem-solving/experimentation for the collaborative to take on, but has not had time to do so?
  - d. Who is ready to reorient strategies and relationships in this moment?
  - e. Who is ready to address and face core questions or ideas necessary to help the collaborative make a bold leap forward in its work?
  - f. Who is in a fertile space for deeper internal leadership work and growth?
  - g. Who holds a radically collaborative spirit to engage beyond the group?
  - h. Who is openly asking and seeking questions to catalyze new ideas and solutions?

*First Round Questions for the individuals*

If selected, there will be an assessment for each person to engage more deeply.

14. What are the key leadership capacities the individual participants have identified for focus in the Fighter League?
15. How do the participants see their time in the Fighter League informing and supporting the collective whole?

## Appendix II: Leader Guide/Participant Conversations Guidance

The expectation for League Guides are as follows

- Participate as a “Leader-Guide” for the Fighter League, project between JCET, Solutions, MSC
- Provide mentorship/thought partnership in a monthly check-in with Fighter League participant
- Attend Fighter League Retreat November 4 - 6, if possible

The conversations between leader-guides and Fighter League participants are reliant on the connections and relationships being built between the two individuals, based on identified needs.

Below are some potential questions or prompts that could be used as a guide, if needed!

### *Potential concepts to explore*

- Discuss the leadership work that the person is exploring - digging into some more self-reflection and conversation about why this project and what they are hoping to see sustained over the coming years.
- Share lessons learned from successes and failures of leadership that has been witnessed. What are things that you want to replicate? Eschew? Create anew?
- Arc and vision for the broader work in community and for how participants are leaning into this vision.
- Creating a culture of self-care for own work, for organization, for community.

### *Some potential questions*

- What is one thing that you are passionate about, trying to nurture, or grappling to understand that you want to deepen in this time?
- What has been a transformative moment that put you on this current path? What was the thing that catalyzed you into action? How do you bring this into your work now?
- In what ways are you bringing your leadership into community? In what ways does community shape your leadership?
- How are you accountable to your community in your work? How will you bring this Fighter League process into your community?
- In what ways can you bring your whole self into this work? What challenges exist to this? What are ways that you can dismantle these challenges?

## Appendix III: Retreat Agenda

### Monday, November 3: Day of Rest and Exploration

- 9 - 10:30: Breakfast together with *conocimiento*:
  - Share the purpose of the retreat and overview of agenda
  - Everyone has a chance to check-in more deeply with one other person using the SPIRE format: **How are you doing...**
    - Spiritually
    - Physically
    - Intellectually
    - Relationally
    - Emotionally
  - Introductions: Name, where you're coming from, what you're bringing with you, and what you're hoping to leave behind or take with you from this retreat
- 10:30 - 6:00: Rest and Exploration (participants have 3 options to choose)
  - Option A: Explore the city
  - Option B: Sleep, rest, relax at the pool
  - Option C: Day trip to the Gulf (we need to get a sense of who so we can arrange travel)
- 7:00: Dinner together with light facilitated conversation
  - 1) **Getting some distance from the day-to-day of your work, what thoughts or questions are arising?**
  - 2) **Tomorrow, as you know, we have a chance to meet with local EJ activists and organizers. How do we want to approach this connection? What do we want to make we do; what do we want to make sure we don't do? In other words, what do the Jemez Principles look like in this context? This all may be obvious, but good for us to be explicit together about our practices as guests here building solidarity across unjust borders.**
  - 3) **What do we hope to contribute tomorrow? What do we hope to bring back to the places where we live and work?**

### Tuesday, November 4: ART-BUILD with Community

- 9 - 10:30: Breakfast
- 10:30 - 4:30 (with a lunch break) Art-build with organizers and EJ activists

- *Tuesday the 5th: Art-build with community* The meeting will take place at the Efrain Calderón Lara Social and Cultural Resource Center: Centro De Estudios e Investigaciones Sociales y Culturales Efrain Calderon, located on Calle 38 No. 453 por 35 y 37 Barrio Obrero: Jesús Carranza 97109 Mérida
- Goals
  - Establishing local to global relationships,
  - Making connections between our two places that share Gulf,
  - Exploring what evolution is needed to cross "borders",
  - Exploring what we need to do to see and sustain leaders who are invisibilized, but are on the frontlines of impact
  - Addressing how we sustain, build solidarity, grapple with power, build power.

### Wednesday, November 5: Evaluation and Moving Forward

- 10:00 - 1:00: Closing Circle of reflections, learnings, journey and evaluation and close of retreat
  - **Check-ins around the circle:**
    - How are you this morning?
    - What are you taking away from our exchange yesterday? (lessons, stories, connections, actions)
    - Anything that could have been better?
  - **Evaluation purpose & overview**
    - To understand what people's experiences were of this pilot version of the Fighter League and what the interest is in keeping the program alive
    - If there is interest in keeping the Fighter League alive, then we want to understand what worked, and what changes should be made to make it more useful for frontline leaders
    - There are a few specific questions we are hoping to explore this morning and then possibly through a follow-up over email (some things are easier to express through writing) - the benefit of being together is the chance to share stories and to have some discussion around what worked and what could be improved
  - **Journal**
    - **BEFORE:** Where were you at (as a leader) when the Fighter League began? What were your intentions & hopes? What challenges and opportunities you were grappling with?
    - **DURING:** What was something you overcame during your time in the fighter league? What was a turning point or a challenge?
    - **AFTER:** Where is alive for you now? What has shifted? What are you bringing back to your collective, community, or movement? (in terms of your approach or skills as a leader, or connections, ideas, actions, etc.)