



# Transformative Mentoring: A Bridge to Opportunity

**Alayla Millow**

Research Assistant, Urban Community Engagement Fellows

On October 3rd, Dr. Kevin Brooks, the new community engagement specialist at the MSU Center for Community and Economic Development, presented to high school students during a ‘Lunch and Learn’ hosted by Capital Area Michigan Works!, Peckham, and the Lansing School District. His presentation focused on transformative topics including principles of personhood, community engagement, community

development, and good practice, highlighting how individual and collective growth are interconnected. To bridge these, Dr. Brooks reflects on how he found fulfillment through philosophies based in Black/Africana Studies, which has a significant focus on academic excellence, social responsibility, and cultural grounding. He emphasized the importance of having an optimal worldview, where the principles of Ankh (Life), Maat (Harmony), and Wedjau (Wellbeing) work together to shape purposeful experiences. Furthermore, he describes how the Black Studies Paradigm, consisting of centeredness, critical analysis, and empowerment, can be used as a framework to create transformative change. His message promotes self-esteem, resilience, and the importance of supporting each other. By fostering a positive mindset and investing in themselves and their peers, students learn that they can build strong, connected, and cohesive communities. Speaking openly about the challenges students face approaching adulthood, Dr. Brooks encouraged students to practice self-determination, agency, and humility when collaborating with members of their communities. He expressed the importance of growing confident in your character and standing with integrity, exercising emotional maturity to reconcile with people, and practicing self-awareness to look back at situations and integrate learning. He stressed students to leverage their strengths and create a safe space for others to share lived experiences for more comprehensive understanding and engagement. These inclusive communication skills and practices will develop students into career-ready adults. Dr. Brooks works to connect with students to spark meaningful conversations, and the result is impactful engagement. This presentation is a reminder that cultivating connections and having open conversations are important factors for people to grow collectively into resilient communities and are necessary when creating a bridge to opportunities.

# The CCED Welcomes Third Cohort of Urban Community Engagement Fellows

The Center for Community and Economic Development selected seven MSU graduate students for the third cohort of the Urban Community Engagement Fellows (UCEF) Program in 2025. The UCEF Program is a joint initiative between The Graduate School and University Outreach and Engagement and connects a multidisciplinary team of researchers with Lansing community organizations for the co-creation of place-based projects in Southwest Lansing. The Fellows represent a variety of academic disciplines and apply asset building community development principles to establish, support, and sustain generative and reciprocal collaborations for mutual benefit and transformative change. Following, an introduction to each fellow shares a brief bio and the projects they're working on.

## Meet the 2025-2026 Urban Community Engagement Fellows

**Simone E. Bibbs** (she/her/hers) is a Doctor of Philosophy student in Human Development and Family Studies, with a concentration in Diversity, Youth, and Family Development in the College of Social Sciences at Michigan State University. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of Kentucky in 2022. Simone's research draws on critical and culturally grounded developmental frameworks to explore how race and gender shape the lived experiences and well-being of Black children and adolescents across family, educational, and socio-cultural contexts. Her work centers on the ways Black youth resist racialized and gendered oppression while celebrating their joy, strength, creativity, and imagination.



*Simone E.  
Bibbs*



*Grace  
Densham*

**Grace Densham** is a fifth-year student in the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture/Master of Environmental Design (BLA/MED) Dual Degree Program in the School of Planning, Design and Construction in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University. Grace will receive a BLA in Fall 2025 and earn an MED with a specialization in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems in Spring 2026. She enjoys identifying plants, creating art, and watching her leopard gecko, Mavis.

**Sam Durgy** is a fifth-year student in the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture/Master of Urban and Regional Planning (BLA/MURP) Dual Degree Program in the School of Planning, Design and Construction in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University. Sam has worked for the MSU Infrastructure Planning and Facilities for more than three years as the Student Aide to the Campus Landscape Architect and has had additional internships where he has gained community engagement experience. He is particularly interested in equitable land use planning and placemaking to help form vibrant communities.



*Sam Durgy*



*Dominic Hateka*

**Dominic Hateka** is a Doctor of Philosophy student in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education in the College of Education at Michigan State University. His research explores decolonial integrations in education, with a particular focus on multiliterate cultural artifacts in school and museum spaces. He serves as a Graduate Research Assistant for the Community-Situated Data Practices in Multiethnic, Youth-Led Research Partnerships at MSU and is a researcher with the Toolbox Dialogue Initiative Center. Dominic has extensive experience in higher education, currently teaching Visual Arts Education and Introduction to Arts in the Classroom at MSU.

**Wasenka Hewage** is a Master of Social Work student in the School of Social Work with a focus on clinical social work. Wasenka is an advocate for mental health awareness and believes successful community engagement is rooted in active listening, empathy, and a genuine commitment to addressing the unique needs of each community. She is passionate about fostering connections and empowering communities to thrive through collaboration, inclusivity, accountability, and empowerment, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes for individuals, organizations, and society. Wasenka is dedicated to community-driven change, bridging the gap between organizations and the diverse communities they serve.



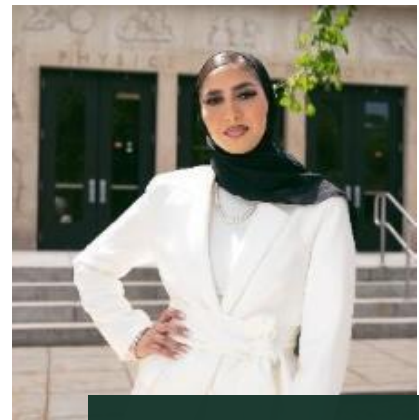
*Wasenka Hewage*



*Prince Gyebi Owusu*

**Prince Gyebi Owusu** is a Doctor of Philosophy candidate in Human Development and Family Studies with a concentration in Child Development in the College of Social Sciences at Michigan State University. His research focuses on the cross-cultural adaptation and validation of child developmental screening tools, as well as the development of culturally responsive interventions for children with disabilities and their families in low-resource settings. Prince is also co-founder and Director of Organizational Development at the Center for Learning and Childhood Development–Ghana (CLCD), a research-driven nonprofit organization that works to improve early childhood outcomes through community-based programs, policy advocacy, and multisectoral collaboration.

**Mariam Turkey** is a Master of Public Health candidate in the College of Human Medicine at Michigan State University, where she also earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with a minor in Human Behavior and Social Sciences. Her work focuses on understanding behavior, systems, and the social determinants that shape health outcomes. Mariam’s professional experiences reflect a deep commitment to both higher education and public health. She has served in multiple student support and leadership roles, including as a Project Assistant in MSU’s Office of Undergraduate Education and as an Iris Scholar with the Health & Risk Communication Center.



*Mariam Turkey*

