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# Detroit community groups work for city's new glory days

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Enlarge By Jeff A. Kowalsky, for USA TODAY

Community group The Greening of Detroit plants trees on Livernois Avenue in southwest Detroit on May 9.

By Judy Keen, USA TODAY

DETROIT — Despair shows on the faces of many people at soup kitchens and in unemployment lines here. And desperation is evident in Craigslist posts from a single mom who needs \$950 for medical bills and a man who can afford to pay just \$650 for a used car he needs to job hunt.

There is something else, though, in this shrinking city beset by chronic poverty and the unraveling of the industry that once made it great: hope.

"There's fire in the ashes and good things happening everywhere," says Jerry Smith, a Capuchin friar who runs two soup kitchens that serve 2,000 meals a day and have seen a

10% increase in demand. "There are reserves of life and strength in us that we never imagine are there until we absolutely need them."

Detroit needs them now. The city's unemployment rate is 23.2%. Chrysler is in bankruptcy-court protection and General Motors is on the verge of a bankruptcy filing. Since 1980, almost 300,000 people have moved out. The city, now with a population of 916,952, faces a \$300 million budget deficit. One-third of residents live below the federal poverty threshold of \$17,330 annual income for a family of three.

Those bleak statistics motivate rather than discourage the individuals and non-profit groups trying to revive the American dream here. They are training displaced workers, feeding the poor, providing medical care, planting vegetable gardens on vacant lots and planning a new Detroit that's smaller, greener and less dependent on the auto industry.

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"It's never going to be the same city that it was, but maybe it will be a better city," says Mary McDougall, a Detroit native and executive director of Operation Able, a group that trains older displaced workers.

The city's believers say Detroit has resilient residents who will work hard and make changes to help it rebound. "Detroit isn't dying," says Harold Schwartz, 60, who was laid off by an auto-parts supplier. "Too many people love the city to let that happen."

Officials and activists see the collapse as an opportunity to remake the city and shift its manufacturing workforce from cars to emerging industries. "We've always dealt with adversity," says Olga Stella, vice president for business development at Detroit Economic Growth.

Not everyone is optimistic. "I don't know what will become of this place," says Helen Moore, 51, who was laid off five months ago by an accounting company. "I do know its glory days are over."

## A car town

Since Henry Ford founded the company that bears his name in 1903, this has been a car town. The auto industry's promise of steady jobs with good pay attracted European immigrants and workers from the South, and by 1950 Detroit was the USA's fourth-largest city.

Detroit is now the 11th-largest U.S. city. Suburban flight and the loss of factory jobs began in the 1960s, but the auto industry's steep decline, the foreclosure crisis and the recession have accelerated decay. Once-vital neighborhoods are filled with boarded-up storefronts and houses. Downtown is still lively, but the ruins of Tiger Stadium and the Michigan Central Depot train station loom nearby.

"We need to work together to get the city from where it is to where everybody wants it to go," Mayor Dave Bing

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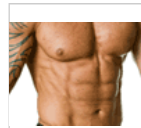
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said after being elected this month to complete the term of Kwame Kilpatrick, who resigned in September amid a sex scandal that put him in jail.

Some of Detroit's dwindling population remains loyal. Peggy Jones, 59, has lived here 32 years and won't leave, even though she has been out of work since she was laid off more than a year ago by a company that auctions vehicles to auto dealers.

Jones is enrolled in Operation Able, which teaches computer skills to displaced workers 40 and older. With a \$650,000 annual budget, it trains about 150 people a year. Students get eight weeks of training, followed by four weeks of help with job searches. If they don't find jobs during that month — and these days, they often don't — the organization works with them until they do. The success rate is about 75%.

"A lot of our clients worked for companies that were dependent on the auto industry," McDougall says. "We see people now who are in a lot more difficult, sometimes almost desperate, straits." To prepare them for jobs in other fields, the program has increased its emphasis on customer-service skills and plans to add training in "green" office practices.

Jones says Operation Able restored her confidence. She has had a couple of job interviews already. Being out of work "has been really frustrating and mind-boggling, worrisome," says Jones, a widow. "My unemployment benefits are about to run out."

Andrew McCray, 59, a Detroit native and Operation Able client, drove trucks that delivered cars to dealers before being laid off. He's hopeful about his future — and the city's. "I really do believe that we have to hold on and believe that things are going to get better," he says.

Focus: Hope, which was founded a year after 1967 riots and works to improve civil and human rights, is retooling its education and community programs to respond to urgent needs.

With a \$25 million annual budget, the organization distributes food commodities to 41,000 people every month; trains machinists and information technology specialists; rehabilitates neighborhoods; and offers youth arts programs and preschool education.

CEO William Jones Jr. says Focus: Hope plans to shorten its machinists program so students can get into the workforce faster, expand its hours so classes are more convenient and create after-school programs.

"We get to do more than read the paper, read all the doom and gloom," Jones says. "We work with people who are determined to better their situation."

McDougall says many people here "assumed that the car companies would always dominate the economy. ... The future looks very different."

### Changing cityscape

So will the city, says Rebecca Salminen Witt, president of The Greening of Detroit. Almost 30% of the city's 143 square miles is vacant, she says, and that number could grow to 60% in the next few years as more homes, businesses and factories disappear.

For two decades, The Greening of Detroit has been planting trees and gardens and cleaning up vacant property. Now the group is helping to lead discussions about a dramatically changed cityscape: allowing large swaths of the city to "naturalize" and become rural again, creating a natural corridor to give wildlife access to the Detroit River and encouraging urban farming.

Abandoned factories, Witt says, could be used to build wind turbines, solar cells and geothermal equipment. "This is no time for cowardice," she says. "We need to be brave, and we need to buy into a big vision collectively."

Bing, the new mayor, said during the campaign that he wants to reshape neighborhoods by asking residents of mostly empty parts of the city to move to areas with fewer vacant homes. Such a move would make providing city services, including police patrols, cheaper and more efficient.

Many neighborhoods already are blooming. In 2008, The Greening of Detroit supported 603 vacant lot, school and family gardens. This year, applications from individuals, community groups and schools quadrupled.

Besides soup kitchens, a food pantry that also distributes clothing and appliances, and a new bakery, the Capuchin friars give away 100,000 plants each year and operate Earthworks, an urban farm that last year grew 6,000 pounds of organic produce.

The city is working to attract new development and more diverse manufacturers. It is replacing old infrastructure such as roads and sewer and water lines in parts of downtown, where development is likely when the recession eases, Stella says. She believes the city can attract new employers to use auto industry facilities and workers to manufacture wind turbines, medical devices and other products.

"This is a difficult time, but we'll get through it," Stella says. "We always seem to."

### Stepping up

People here are stepping up to help one another. Two years ago, Julie Kennedy-Carpenter created a website, Julie's List ([julieslist.homestead.com](http://julieslist.homestead.com)), as a hobby. Now it's a popular resource for laid-off workers who need financial, medical and emergency help. There are links to groups that give away clothing and food and to low-cost car repair and credit counseling.

Kennedy-Carpenter, who works for a Detroit-area community action agency, wanted to help people who didn't know where to find assistance or were too proud to ask. "A lot of people don't realize there's so much help out

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there," she says. She has never advertised, but people are spreading the word, and the site has gotten 50,000 hits.

Kennedy-Carpenter has no doubt that Detroit will rebound. "We're survivors here," she says.

Chris Vitale also went online when he was laid off — temporarily, he hopes — by Chrysler. His website, FairImage.org, explores how U.S. trade and energy policies affect the auto industry.

Vitale meets regularly with about 10 laid-off auto industry workers and retirees and tries to spread the message that U.S.-made vehicles and American workers are not inferior to those in Japan and South Korea.

"A lot of my co-workers and friends, they're just feeling hopeless," Vitale says, and the website is a way to channel his frustration into something positive. He hasn't given up on Detroit or Chrysler, where he has worked for 15 years. "We can come back," he says.

Help also is coming from outside Detroit. Children's Health Fund, a national health care provider and advocacy group, last month launched Kids Can't Wait here. The program will spend about \$1.5 million to offer free medical and dental services to Detroit children with a mobile clinic that will make weekly stops in depressed areas.

"Detroit is the epicenter of America's economic crisis," says Irwin Redlener, Children's Health Fund president and a professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. Still, he says, "There seems to be an inherent cultural optimism that I found very engaging and uplifting." The attitude here, he says, is "we're down, but we're going to get back on our feet."

That's what Doreen Benguche, 33, is doing. A mother of three, she decided to go back to school after she was laid off from her bank-teller job in January. She's in a "fast-track" basic skills program at Focus: Hope and will soon start IT courses there.

Tears fill her eyes as she describes how the heartbreak of being laid off led to hope. "I was disappointed and distraught, but I had to turn it into a positive outcome," she says. "I can see the road ahead now."

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One of our better hopes is their standard of living explodes, raising their costs so we compare better ;)

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