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A Modern Take on 40 Acres and a Mule

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Design

In my [quest to understand perceptions of cotton and agriculture within the African American community](#), I have found that one's personal experiences are critical in forming one's perception. At the start of this research journey, I visited The National Black Farmers Conference in Pearl Mississippi. This conference was hosted by founder Dr. John Wesley Boyd Jr. and his wife Kara Brewer Boyd program and event coordinator. After conducting interviews with black farmers from various parts of the country I walked

away with a few key insights on how farmers and agricultural workers view agriculture socially as well as economically. It seemed that productivity was their main concern, as they all expressed an urge to share their agricultural products with a broader audience, as well as to serve their communities and make economic strides. I took the information that I gained from the farmers I interviewed and shared it with my peers in art and design.

I reached out to the New School community to have a dinner discussion series that focused on perceptions of cotton and agriculture within in the African American community. We talked about an array of topics like sharecropping and family ancestry as well as media perceptions of success within America and how that is reflected within the black community. At this event, I noticed that there was a genuine interest in socially and environmentally responsible farming, but not the same spiritual and ancestral motivations as the farmers. Labor and success were reoccurring themes, as many in attendance agreed that it was passed down from their parents' generation that leaving the farm was a sign of success. Although as a group we came to the conclusion that seeking a future in agriculture wasn't deemed successful, there was a genuine

energy among the group that was interested in collaborating with these farmers, and I began to think of the ways in which a relationship between artists, designers and agricultural community could arise. Breaking Bread Part II was the second installment of the dinner discussion series that I started with the Tishman Center. As result of Breaking Bread Part I where we discussed perceptions of cotton and agriculture within the African American community, it seemed that moving into a more interactive direction for Part II was ideal. After reflecting on the insights gained from the conference and Breaking Bread Part I, it seemed apparent to me that if economic productivity was on the minds of these farmers then reaching out to a design community as prospective collaborators and problem solvers could be beneficial to both parties because artists and designers are in need of materials, and farmers are in search of productivity can supply them. For Breaking Bread Part II the night was divided into two sections. I started by splitting the participants into four groups. Each group received a design prompt and case study. My goal was to give the groups prompts based on the information I gathered from my interviews with the farmers from the National Black Farmers conference. I also created a fictional case study

based on a farm to table sustainable fashion brand. The first design prompt that was handed out read "As an artist, designer or consumer how can I be of service?" I chose this wording because it is one of the first things I learned in art school, and it has informed my process as a design and has stuck with me since. In addition to the graphic above, each group received different case studies. As the night progressed I traveled between groups as a moderator in order to help the groups think critically about design not only as a solution but the ways in which a design solution can also become a social intervention. The groups had 25 minutes for each section. The first section was for brainstorming and the second section was for a final plan and preparation to present. Each group presented for 5 minutes.

Group A worked on Kwame as a case study. Kwame's case was to "create a farmer's market that brings affordable, organic, healthy food to the North East sector of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma." Kwame has previously attempted to start a farmer's market in his area but had difficulty with marketing and organizing to ensure the community's participation. Group A came up with an alternative economic model that would act as a "work or pay CSA" strategy where members of the North East sector

specifically could work on the farmland and receive the week's CSA produce as an exchange for their labor. Group B worked on Bonita Clemons Hibiscus tea business. Bonita “envisioned a network of young people ages 21-30 to sell her teas.” During the exercise this group came up with the idea to become a non-profit organization that targeted the age group she is interested in working with. They envisioned giving each young person a sector in which they could build a business with in the umbrella of her business and get more young people to sell her teas, as business owners. They divided the nonprofit into two sectors. One as Bonita’s corporate and the other as Bonita’s foundation. Both would work as employment training opportunities that would eventually lead the youth into an entrepreneurial position where they could sell her dry and bottled teas in order to raise funds and grow their own network.

Ellen Reddy, whom I interviewed at the National Black Farmers Conference, was the only interviewee that was not a farmer. Her take on agriculture was different because she picked cotton as child and felt that the crop itself carried the pain. She created a healing garden that was a place to heal from the pain of her past. I felt that building a case study on healing would be a great way to

think about how a design solution can also aid in mending a societal issue. Group C's prompt was to come up with a way to bring her personal healing garden idea to a larger audience in the form of a public space. Group C came up with an outdoor community center that had an array of services for the community that would encourage healing and promote a stronger community as well as help to mend tarnished relationships with agriculture.

Group D was a fictional case study that I constructed based on a denim company in North Carolina that functions in a way that I aspire to one day emulate. As a supplement to the case study I showed the group a video chronicling the history of denim in relation to American iconography. As a group we discussed for a short period how "blue jeans" are portrayed in the media as a signifier of American culture yet there was no indicator of the cotton crop, which is what the denim textile is made from. We discussed how the cotton crop has assimilated into American culture with brands like "American cotton" and cultural signifiers like blue jeans. As we spoke about consumerism and representations in the media in part one, in part two we discussed the ways in which the history of denim has been washed away and how

although it is a classic symbol of American iconography, still the correlation of denim to cotton and then cotton to slavery in America is not an image that becomes immediately apparent. I tend to look at denim as an analogy for *the American way*. It's like if we focus on denim, we don't have to think about cotton. Gabriela Corretjer a student in the Integrated Design program responded to the video saying "They are talking about not washing denim, but they have washed away its history." This was in reference to a scene in the video that showed a man excavating a very old dirty pair of denim jeans from a mining cave. What we found as a group that was significant about this discovery was that these jeans were then auctioned and sold for up to \$10,000 because of the natural wear and tear they gain overtime. When thinking about our previous dialog about labor and success, the politics of a work uniform that most likely belonged to an underpaid immigrant worker being sold for its *authenticity* and then aestheticized as an all American "look" is truly the cycle that we all aim to diminish amongst this Breaking Bread group.

After watching and discussing the video discussion Group D saw that their challenge wasn't so much to think of the ways in which they could collaborate with farms, but how to

connect the history of the American cotton production to the glamorized version that denim is today. This group came up with a farm to table brand school that offered its processing facilities to persons who successfully made it through there denim certification program. What was unique about this program was that the courses would start on the farm and the cotton would be contextualized as it has existed truly in American history and students would gradually make their way to designing's construction and marketing. This method would serve as a way to educate customers and designers of not only what they are buying but what they are buying into. In each group presentation at the end of the night there was a common thread of integrating farming practices that encouraged community gathering and building as well as education initiatives. What was interesting to me was how plausible and detailed each of these design solutions were and how implementing them could be a real reality. In my first article I talked about project make-place which would act as a host for design and agricultural collaborations. After hosting Breaking Bread Part II, I think I have a better understanding of the role both myself and my peers play in advocating for more agriculturally centered endeavors that help to aid

underserved farming communities such as those I met at the National Black Farmers Conference who are interested in creating a business that utilizes their goods both inside and outside of the food system.

My research findings with the Tishman Center have helped to elevate my project to a new level with the incite that I was able to gain courtesy of their grant and I am incredibly appreciative of the opportunities that this fellowship has brought to me. Although I am at the beginning of my quest I will take what I've gained in my time with The Tishman Center with me until I see it through.

As an artist, designer or consumer how can I be of service ?



Kwame Mboya

"you can do more {with agriculture} to make investments for the future"

About Kwame:

Grandparents were enslaved by the Chickasaw people, after freed they were allotted 20 and 40 acres of land. This land is the land that Kwame operates on.

He is a non-certified organic farmer, in his words "he farms the way farming was always supposed to be."

The Case:

Kwame's farm is in a predominately black community, there is only one other major food outlet. He considers the area around his farm in the North East Sector of Oklahoma City to be a "food desert."

Kwame wants to create a farmer's market that brings affordable organic healthy food to the North East sector.

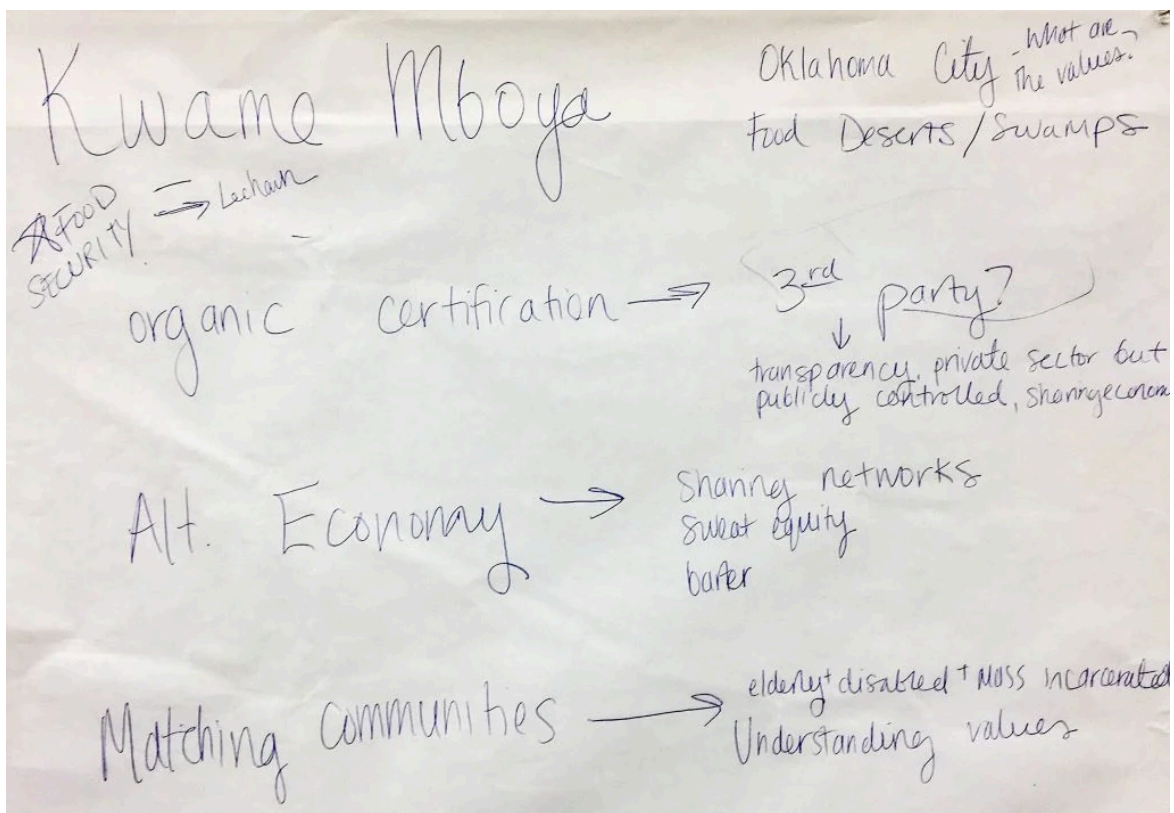
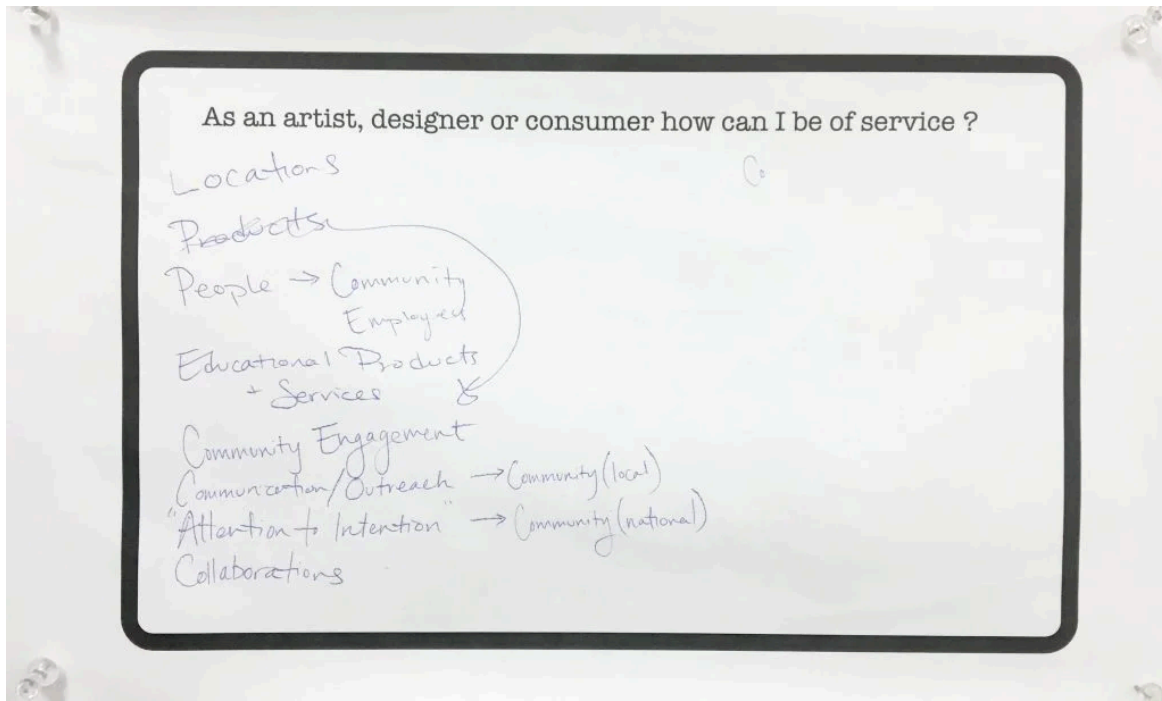
Demographics:

Northeast Oklahoma City

Northeast Oklahoma City is home to Oklahoma's largest African American community. It is located roughly east of I-235 and north of I-40. Neighborhoods in this district include the Medical District and the Lincoln Terrace neighborhood. This district includes the Oklahoma State Capitol, most of the state office buildings, and the OU Health Sciences Center. The district is well known as one of the culinary hubs of Oklahoma City, with world-famous BBQ and soul food being served. The district has a mix of low, middle and upper income residents, often within only a few blocks of each other.

* Key factors to consider

- Marketing and advertising to attract farmers and prospective farmers market shoppers
- There are two other markets that have happened in the area but the problem is consistency He wants a good organizational structure and to incorporate black farmers and farm operators
- A skill share to make to the market





Bonita Clemons

About Bonita:

She belongs to an all-black farming co-op of about 18 individuals.

Bonita does not have organic certification however she does grow organically and sustainably as she feels that is what farming was always meant to be.

Bonita has her own business selling delicious ginger hibiscus tea that is made from the hibiscus plants that she grows.

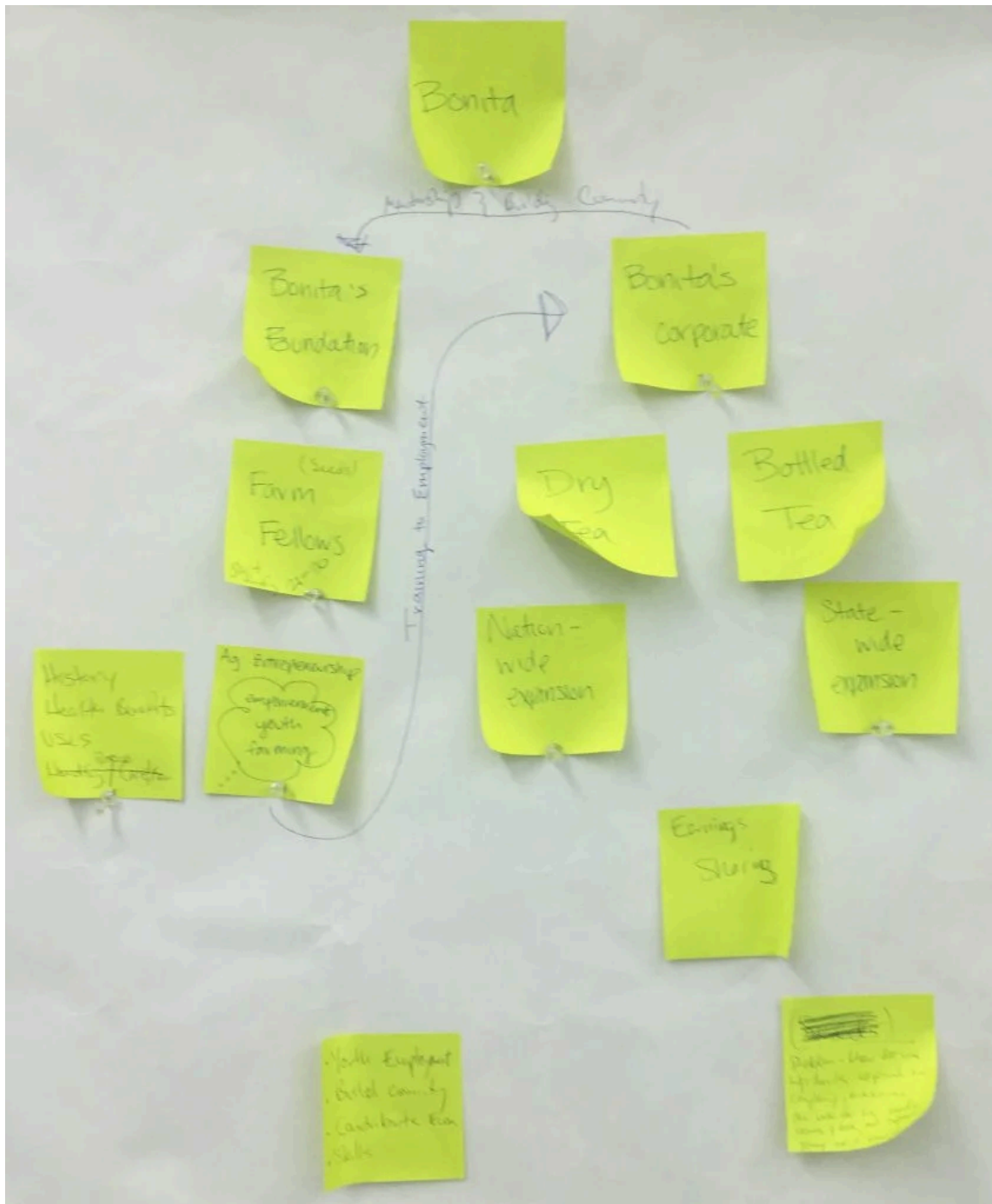
The Case:

Bonita is currently selling in local stores but wants to expand nationally.

Bonita envisions a network of young people to sell her teas. She wants to work with ages 21-30 in order to create revenue but to also provide her "young people" with some ownership.

*Key factors to consider

- Think growth and development
- A business network /multiple streams of income
- Bonita sells her organic seeds for 2\$ a piece , 1 seed yields 1000 seeds from the plant , she sells the dried leaves and a bottled beverage.





Agriculture is her healing.

Ellen Reddy

"I love dirt."

About Ellen:

Ellen picked cotton as child and remembers the ways in which it pricked her fingers and the physical aches and pains to her body. An interesting comment that she made was that perhaps if she was working for herself she might have felt different. But not if all of the work and pain was for someone else's benefit.

Agriculture for Ellen is freedom and her peace garden is a place to heal through the grieving process.

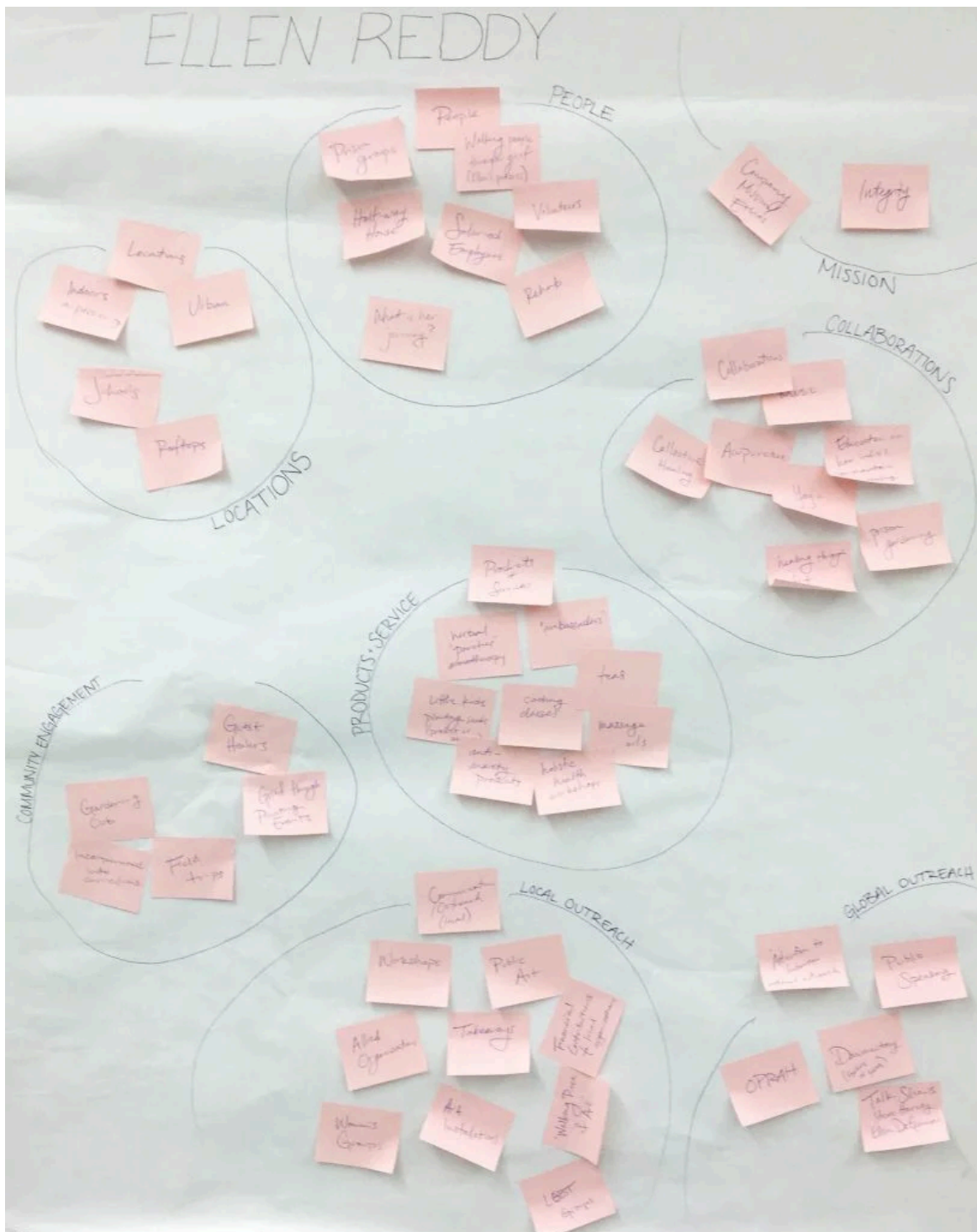
The Case:


Ellen believes that nature is a beauty that can be shared and want to bring her mechanism for healing to a community platform and incorporate mental and physical healing and medicinal herbs.

Ellen wants to build an outdoor community garden center. That grows lavender, aromatic herbs like, thyme, rosemary and passion flower as well as plants with medicinal properties like chamomile and Echinacea.

*Key factors to consider

- How can her personal healing journey be reflected in a community platform for others the partake in?
- How can the space be open for public in what ways can healing be encouraged?
- Brainstorm locations {vacant lot or old playground, a misused space}





**Evan and Stella
Finkelpearl**

Denim Workplace

**“Artisanal made denim made the way it was
originally, with no short cuts.”**

These designers were recently accepted into the cfda, they are a brother sister duo working out of a small town known for its exceptional denim quality when production was popular in the USA decades ago. The family duo uses traditionally American pattern making and construction. Every aspect of their denim from the fabric to the cotton used to make the fabric is made in America.

The Case:

They have designed the jeans with the smallest carbon footprint on earth made with the states first crop of certified organic cotton.

How can this denim brand become a tool for building community outside of agricultural and factory workers? Think about marketing and merchandising in relation to the material. They introduced organic cotton to Raleigh how else can they evoke change through awareness and branding.

***Key factors to consider**

- Think about the brand identity
- They have access to material processing and machinery
- They have a fully stocked workshop studio with employees and machinery all necessary clothing construction tools
- A store front in their small town and a flagship in NYC

As an artist, designer or consumer how can I be of service?

- Iconic American product - Americano -
- Made in America/CFDA. Leveraging
- Cradle to cradle - Sustainability - Washing -
- Authenticity - Integrity - of product/Materiality .
- Tradition/Past -- Narrative --
- \$ - Black Cowboys - Buffalo Soldiers - Native American
- Whose history -- is represented -
- Cotton -- history - Indigo -- Dye -- Fabric of our lives -
- Globalization/off shore production --

