

Donnel Baird, Founder of BlocPower

By Whitney L.J. Howell

If you asked Donnel Baird, he'd likely describe himself first as a community organizer – someone who works with underserved communities at the grassroots level to improve facilities and services.

And, it's that community organizer background, and his time as an energy efficiency staffer for the Obama administration, that led him to create BlocPower. It's an organization that brings together climate-change minded investors and cutting-edge technologies to implement energy saving-strategies in financially-underserved communities.

"We're building a software infrastructure that allows communities to take control of their own energy needs and the costs that come with it," said Baird, who led the energy-efficiency portion of the stimulus package after President Obama's election.

As an online marketplace, BlocPower groups together four or more businesses, schools, houses of worship, or multi-family facilities in financially-insecure areas that are interested in lowering high energy bills through energy-efficient strategies. Outside investments from banks or other institutions help create pricing discounts across each block, and investors are repaid out of the subsequent energy savings, Baird said.

"I got into this position to create energy savings for customers, financial returns for investors, and reduce carbon emissions," he said.

In addition to strengthening communities through lower bills, BlocPower is building up the economic engine in these areas by hiring underemployed community members to complete these projects. Each employee completes rigorous third-party green-job training certification, preparing them to implement energy-efficient systems.

"We get most excited about working with and hiring young adults who grew up in low-income public housing," Baird said. "We make sure they're trained over a six-month period by partner organizations to do energy-efficient analysis."

So far, he said, the projects have made significant impacts on participants, helping them save money while fundamentally changing the way they consume energy resources.

For example, one church pastor approached Baird and BlocPower to help lower the \$120,000 annual heating and cooling bill – more than 30 percent of the congregation's budget – for the 150-year-old church's building. Using a mix of energy-efficient strategies, BlocPower reduced the church's power bill by nearly 40 percent.

BlocPower is still growing, trying to gain market share and recognition. Projects, concentrated mainly on the East Coast in New York City, Boston, Washington, D.C., and the Triangle, are still small-scale –

roughly 100 buildings at a time. The overall goal, Baird said, is to be a technology, financial, and energy provider to inner cities, refitting 1,000 to 10,000 structures per project.

Although Baird has gained significant experience since leaving Duke, it, ultimately, was his time at the University – with inspirational professors – that showed him how to combine resources and skills to make impactful change for groups that need it most.

“My time at Duke educated me in what was possible as a community organizer – that it is possible to make a difference in the world and make a change,” he said. “We can get together as individuals and make a change in the community. That’s the fundamental shift in perspective you have to have for successful business or social change.”