



Environmental Education and Stewardship  
Photo Credit: Urban Releaf

## KEMBA SHAKUR: ON A 'RELEAFING' MISSION IN OAKLAND

Tim Beatley

Kemba Shakur founded the nonprofit Urban Releaf in 1998, with the goal of transforming many of the least affluent parts of the City of Oakland from largely gray and barren places to living environments of trees and greenspaces. Shakur who worked for a time as a prison guard at Soledad state prison, famously observed when she moved to Oakland that there were more trees on the grounds of the prison than on her street. In fact there was not a single tree on her Oakland street. "It was street after street of no greenery," she told me in a recent phone interview. She has devoted most of adult life to changing these conditions.

The work of Urban Releaf is not top-down but community-based, and trees are planted by individuals, organizations and companies. Much of the tree planting, and more recently sidewalk gardening and green rooftop installation, happens through events. Shakur tells about a recent event she was especially excited about, in honor of Muhammad Ali, and involving a well-known Bay area rapper, Mistah Fab. Partners for this event include the East Oakland and Lightning's Boxing Clubs, with support from Eureka Bank, Calfire, and PG&E, among others. These tree planting events sound much like community parties, with music and fun and often many activities to engage kids. And the [video](#) of

the event posted later on YouTube certainly shows the extent of the fun and also the personal and organizational efforts that go into these events.

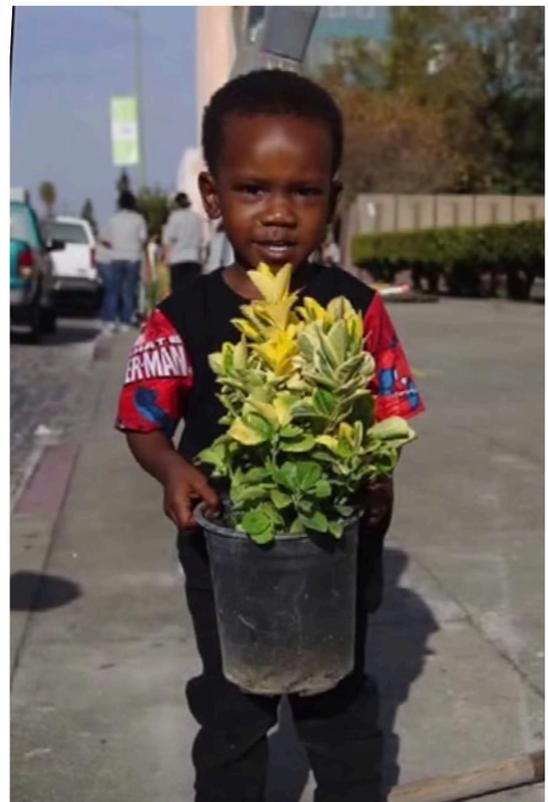
In Shakur's daily work, she draws from her love of nature and gardening. Growing up in Hunters Point, a poor neighborhood in San Francisco, she remembers fondly the trips to nature she would take with her mother: "She took us to parks, both her and my dad, every chance they got. We went to Big Basin and Big Sur, Yosemite, just so many of the natural parks. Stinson Beach, up and down the coast. Big Basin was my favorite." She has clearly absorbed this early love of nature, and also love for growing food, and applies them every day in her work in Oakland.

There is a strong social justice dimension to Shakur's work. Oakland is itself a microcosm of the economic and social disparities in many cities, and these disparities manifest clearly in the extent of "greenness." The City's poor and minority flatlands of East Oakland stand in contrast to the leafy affluent Oakland Hills.

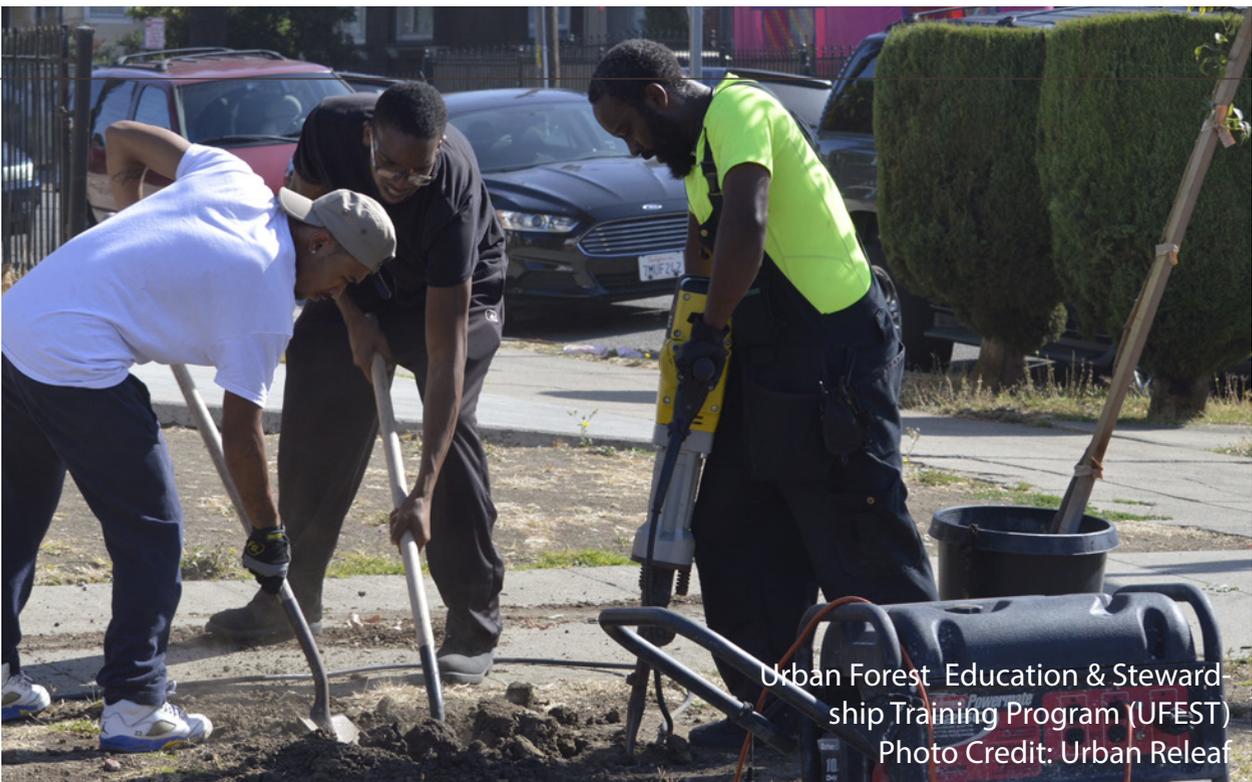
Over its nearly two-decade history, Urban Releaf has accomplished much, including the planting and maintenance of some 20,000 trees. The organization has trained many in the community in how to maintain and care for these trees, and helped shape the career paths of many disadvantaged youth in the process. She points to her own son, who has become an arborist, as evidence of the power of imagining a professional path inspired by this work.

She also notes the continuing struggles for the better. She tells me, in regretful

tones, about the two men she had to lay off because of limited funding. One was later convicted of murder, the other shot and killed while breaking up a fight. The story was testament to the tough urban setting that kids and young people in neighborhoods of color face in cities like Oakland. This sense of the potential of trees and tree-planting to profoundly change the lives of these young people for the better seems a deep motivation for what she does with Urban Releaf. She mentions her friend Mohammed Nuru, who ran the successful non-profit SLUG (San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners), and how time spent with him convinced her of the potential of this model in impacting lives.



Tribute to Muhammad Ali Planting  
Photo Credit: Urban Releaf



Urban Forest Education & Stewardship Training Program (UFEST)  
Photo Credit: Urban Releaf

She says, “I noticed the young people in Hunters Point had jobs. They had pride... As we were going [along], a young man flagged him [Nuru] down and invited him to his wedding. So I’m, like, wow. This doesn’t happen unless people are secure in a job.” Creating jobs is a key goal and a key lesson for Shakur.

“It’s the tough part of employment in communities of color and cities like Oakland. It’s really one of the main reasons that I stay here. I love trees and canopy, and I think we all love it here, but the other side of it is having the capacity to really hire and train young people because it’s really life and death in terms of what their future could hold if you get them through those critical years. It can keep them out of a lot of trouble and idle time.”

Maintaining a healthy and sustainable level of funding remains a challenge for Shakur. One bright spot is the new fund-

ing flowing from California’s innovative cap and trade program. Companies can purchase pollution credits which go into a state fund to support greenhouse gas-reduction projects. Urban tree-planting is already benefitting, and as a result of Senate Bill 535, at least 25% of these climate funds must be spent on projects that benefit disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Urban Releaf has a small staff of around ten, and much of its work happens through a variety of partnerships, with organizations from the Girl Scouts to the Mennonite church. Many involve working with troubled kids—for instance through organizations like Berkeley Youth Alternatives, and through the Weekend Training Academy, which serves as an alternative to detention for juvenile youth offenders. Recently Shakur and her team have been helping to plant trees as part of an initiative to “re-oak” the city. Oakland is one of the largest cities to be named after a tree, and this species holds a special place

in the history of the city, though through development it has gradually lost most of these oak trees.

Shakur spoke to me about the pride of what she and Oakland Releaf have accomplished. "I think at the end of the day I'm most proud of the fact that I created something that brought people together, that brought all kinds of people together." She also speaks of the personal solace she gets from trees. She refers to them as her "sanctuary," and speaks of the pleasure she gets from just watering the trees. There is a clear pride in bringing beauty and nature to struggling urban neighborhoods.

She describes the pride she feels when she sees trees planted by her crew for the first time. "Then, you see it and it's, like, oh I'm so proud of that. That's our tree! It's so beautiful. It's the perfect job. It's the best job in the world."

References:

Urban Releaf. <http://www.urbanreleaf.org>.

Urban Releaf (2016, Oct 29). Tribute to Muhammed Ali Planting Oct - 2016 [Video File]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qnAP9SOA9I>.

