

Things Are Looking Up: Detroit Begins the Rebuilding Process

In the eyes of the public, modern Detroit is a grim shadow of its booming former self, a harbinger of doom for industrialized cities everywhere. Once the most productive city in the United States, it is now a symbol of economic devastation and post-industrial decay. The collapse of the domestic auto industry and subsequent closures of steel and machine tool manufacturers left thousands of workers unemployed and prompted a mass exodus from city limits. The catastrophic population decrease left Detroit with fewer than 720,000 residents as of 2010—the city has lost 60% of its peak population, with a 25% drop in the past decade alone. Lower census numbers have led to decreased tax revenues, forcing city officials to make tough decisions about infrastructure maintenance.

On paper, Detroit is well on its way to ruin.

For four recent graduates working in the area, however, the city's reality is considerably brighter than the statistics would suggest. According to Mairi Smith, Jill Johnson, Laurilee Lewis and Yeimy Jones, Detroit may be down but it is certainly not out.

The four women, who work together at the communications agency Team Detroit, paint a picture of hope and potential. Under the radar of the news cameras, they say, members of the Detroit community are banding together and quietly working to build a new, sustainable future for their city.

"Detroiters are humble. Even though the national media has dogged them, they bite their tongues and stay positive. They are excited to take advantage of new opportunities to lift the city out of its current state," said Lewis, a 2009 Marketing and Finance graduate.

Strong, stable companies like Team Detroit, which originated as an integrated communications agency for Ford Motor Company, are key to resuscitating the city's depressed economy, which has been in an accelerated decline since 2000. In 2010, the per capita income was just \$15,062 and 34.5% of Detroit residents were living below the poverty line.

In the new Detroit, businesses are focusing on corporate culture and innovation as a way to attract and retain top-level employees. According to Johnson, who has been with Team Detroit since 2010, the company embraces the practice with a "work hard, play hard" philosophy. Small perks like in-office massages, manicures and yoga classes offer opportunities to decompress during the workweek, while company-wide policies ensure employee fulfillment on a global scale. With a relaxed, flexible work environment and a high level of individual autonomy, Team Detroit understands that a strong company starts with satisfied employees. "We have complete ownership of our work, which keeps everyone engaged, and the company also makes sure we step away from work to create a healthy balance," said Johnson.

Team Detroit is one of many local businesses that are determined to revitalize Detroit's natural environment, using greener policies designed to fix the city's image as a post-

industrial urban wasteland. Employees are allowed two paid volunteer days each year in a partnership with The Greening of Detroit, a volunteer organization that seeks to improve the city with tree-planting projects, environmental education, urban agriculture, and open space reclamation. In addition, Lewis was impressed with in-company initiatives like waste reduction, "Green week," all-organic cafeteria offerings and bike rentals. "Detroit businesses are making the push to become more conscious corporate citizens," she said.

With the concerted efforts of private citizens, non-profit groups, government officials and local companies like Team Detroit, the spirit of community is alive and well in Detroit. Volunteer days and school programs aim to improve the quality of life for residents; city officials have implemented programs to clean up the city, boost safety and increase traffic to the downtown area. "Team Detroit and other businesses really try to support the downtown area by doing things like sponsoring hockey trips, holding parties there and giving employees memberships to the Detroit Art Institute," said Jones. "It's a safe, fun and thriving place."

Even more impressive, says Smith, is the small-town atmosphere of support and generosity that has arisen among the people who remained after the city's crash. "A few months ago, we got a company-wide email about a new business opening up downtown, and employees donated their time to help the new owners move in. We may be a large city, but we are a true community. Things are looking up for Detroit."