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**U.S.**

# Pittsburgh Is Losing Black Residents. One Entrepreneur Is Trying to Bring Them Back.

Venture capitalist David Motley is on a mission to help Black professionals take advantage of city's rebirth as center for technology, healthcare and education

By [Kris Maher](#) / Photographs by Nate Smallwood for *The Wall Street Journal*  
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PITTSBURGH—After years of population loss, the former steel town has been reborn as one of America's most livable cities.

But while its white population has stabilized, it continues to lose Black residents at a faster clip than other major cities.

David Motley, a Black venture capitalist, is trying to change that, namely by bringing more Black professionals to Pittsburgh, now a burgeoning center for technology, business and education. In 2003, he moved back to Pittsburgh after getting an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School and living in 10 other cities, including Atlanta. He is now hoping to build up a strong middle class in a city that has been hemorrhaging Black residents for years.

“How do you make this new economy available for more people?” said Mr. Motley. “There’s not going to be an overnight fix to this.”

In the past decade, Pittsburgh has lost 9% of its Black population, and it is losing that population at a much faster annual rate than other cities such as Chicago. As the city began attracting more tech companies in the early 2000s and neighborhoods were gentrified, in some cases Black residents could no longer afford to stay. Many moved to outlying suburbs with lower housing costs. Meanwhile, the white population in Pittsburgh has stabilized after 70 years of decline.

In January, Mr. Motley co-founded a \$50 million Pittsburgh-based venture capital fund to invest in technology startups with Black and diverse founding teams. He started a nonprofit in 2017 with his wife, Darlene Motley, called the African American Directors Forum aimed at getting more Black executives on corporate boards. He also recently acquired a former synagogue and school with a partner and plans to break ground in June on an \$18.5 million affordable and market-rate housing development in an area where Black residents have dramatically declined amid gentrification in the past decade or so.

He sometimes acts as a recruiter himself. Tagbo Niepa, now an assistant professor of chemical and petroleum engineering at the University of Pittsburgh, said Mr. Motley flew to Philadelphia in 2017 to tell him how welcoming Pittsburgh was to Black professionals.



In Pittsburgh's Larimer neighborhood, two residents shoot hoops. A crossing guard walks across Larimer Avenue. Vacant homes and renovated homes sit side by side. David Motley talks to a resident while walking along Dean Street, where he grew up and his parents still own a house.

Mr. Niepa, who held a fellowship at the University of Pennsylvania at the time, decided to move his family, and he now researches the use of microbes to fight disease at Pitt's campus in the city. "So Pittsburgh ended up being a great place," he said.

Mr. Motley grew up on the edge of Larimer, in an area that suffered decades of decline. About a dozen blocks away is one of Pittsburgh's success stories, Bakery Square, where Google and others opened offices starting in 2010. The development spans 1.7 million square feet of offices, retail and residential space where nearly 4,000 workers collectively earn an estimated \$345 million a year in compensation. Larimer residents have largely missed out on the new opportunities.

Mr. Motley, whose parents still own the house where he grew up, remembers doing his homework at the dining room table, while at the other end his father, then a custodian, studied for his college courses. His father would eventually retire as director of plant operations for the city after a 42-year career.

The younger Mr. Motley worked for 20 years with PPG Industries and then for medical-device company Respironics. In 2010, he decided to pursue his own ventures. He is now also chief executive of MCAPS LLC, a professional services company based in Pittsburgh.

He said Google's move into an old Nabisco factory in Larimer was transformational for Pittsburgh and the neighborhood. Yet grass-filled lots still sit between houses on the block where Mr. Motley grew up.

“It looks like there was a war,” he said.



Bakery Square is one of Pittsburgh’s success stories, where Google and others opened offices starting in 2010.

Economic conditions for Black residents are among the worst in urban America, despite sustained efforts to improve them. In Pittsburgh, nearly 45% of Black children live in poverty. Only Milwaukee, Buffalo and Cleveland have higher rates, according to a University of Wisconsin study last year of the nation’s 50 largest cities.

In the study, Pittsburgh ranked among the worst for a range of economic and social indicators for Black residents. It had the fourth-lowest annual median income for Black households at

\$33,121. The city was fifth-worst for rates of death by homicide for Black residents, and it was third-worst for a measure of economic mobility.

The city is poised to elect its first Black mayor, Ed Gainey, who is running on issues of diversity and equity. Mr. Gainey won the Democratic primary this month, defeating current Mayor Bill Peduto. There are no Republicans running, which means Mr. Gainey will almost certainly be the city's next mayor in November.

In an interview, Mr. Gainey, who lives a few blocks from where Mr. Motley grew up, said he wants to boost affordable housing and workforce development programs, and he bemoaned that the city doesn't have a Black middle-class neighborhood. "If we're not seeing growth for all people of this city, then we're not seeing growth," he said.

To gain site control of the synagogue property, Mr. Motley partnered with the developer that built Google's offices. The company, Walnut Capital, announced in February it is giving a \$2 million grant to Larimer, partly to fund workforce development.



Pittsburgh's Larimer neighborhood has suffered decades of decline, with grass-filled lots sitting between houses.

Todd Reidbord, president of Walnut Capital, said the company is planning to build a pedestrian bridge over a road and railroad track to connect the rest of Larimer to Bakery Square. The company hired a Black artist for a public art project, and two Black chefs will work out of a new restaurant on the site.

“I think we all have this separate attitude that we have to dispel,” said Donna Jackson, chair of the Larimer Consensus Group, a resident organization. “Go across that bridge. Go buy you some food. Go to Starbucks. Just sit and read.”



Mr. Motley said Pittsburgh's relatively small size and its pool of talented people enables potentially powerful connections that might not happen in bigger cities.

An example has been the creation of Black Tech Nation, a nonprofit that aims to empower Black tech professionals in Pittsburgh and beyond.



Kelauni Jasmyn is founder and CEO of Black Tech Nation.

Kelauni Jasmyn, who moved to Pittsburgh in 2016 to take a three-month coding course, said the idea grew out of her questioning why there was no Black tech community in the city. A year later, she organized a one-day forum on the issue. It

was attended by just 85 people, but it raised her profile across the city.

Sean Sebastian, a white venture capitalist in Pittsburgh, invited her to his office and became a mentor. He put her in touch with Mr. Motley.

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*What effects do you predict Motley's efforts will have on the city? Join the conversation below.*

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Today, she is the founder and CEO of Black Tech Nation, a networking and support group, which counts more than 700 Black software engineers and others as members. “Our #DigitalWakanda is coming soon!” its website says.

Separately, in January, Ms. Jasmyn, Mr. Sebastian and Mr. Motley launched a \$50 million fund called Black Tech Nation Ventures to invest in tech companies.

“I don’t think I could have started this anywhere else but Pittsburgh, especially at the time that I came,” said Ms. Jasmyn. “It’s so small and yet there’s a lot of powerful people.”

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