The smiles may have been covered by masks, but the corner of 61st Street and Blackstone Avenue was still the most convivial place in the neighborhood every Saturday from 9am-2pm throughout the summer and fall. Forced changes due to COVID-19 neither dampened spirits nor diminished our 61st Street Farmers Market’s mission to provide healthy, locally produced foods for our South Side community.

Starting five weeks later than planned and missing some of our usual vendors, the Market welcomed 18 vendors and approximately 1,000 customers each week from June 27 through November 21. Despite a 40-50% decline in Market customers compared to last year, we were thrilled to see that vendor sales were up over 2019, as customers shopped for others besides themselves and South Siders are cooking more meals at home.

A new layout to allow greater distance between customers and vendors wrapped the Market around the Experimental Station building for the first time, drawing Build Coffee—located on Blackstone—into the heart of the Market’s activities. Customers enjoyed the ‘back street vibe,’ while Build’s patio got regular use. Whether or not 2021 will require us to continue to social distance, the new Market layout will likely be a permanent feature!

Supporting More Fresh Food from Farmers of Color

This summer, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and protests to end systemic racism, Experimental Station was approached by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to help address two problems: how to get more quality food grown and distributed on the South and West sides of Chicago and how to support and invest in the livelihoods of local farmers who identify as Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC).

For decades, Chicago’s South and West sides—predominantly low-income Black and Latinx communities—have suffered from low access to quality foods, resulting in high levels of diet-related chronic illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, and obesity. The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities highlighted the need for better local food options for every community in Illinois, but even more so for those with little access to fresh fruits and vegetables.

In partnership with IDHS, Experimental Station created and managed the Fresh Food from Farmers of Color Fund (FFFC). Local BIPOC farmers were able to apply for funds to purchase needed equipment and make infrastructural improvements that would lead to increased production and distribution of fresh produce on Chicago’s South and West sides in future years. In total, 25 applications—some of which involved multi-farmer collaborations—were awarded over $670,000 in grants for a wide range of projects.

We are grateful for this partnership with IDHS and are excited about the short- and long-term benefits the FFFC Fund will provide to each of the farmers that received a grant, as well as to those Chicagoans living in our most under-resourced neighborhoods.
Dear friend,

From its inception, Experimental Station has looked to biological ecosystems to guide our organizational development, understanding that diversity is the source of any healthy ecosystem’s dynamism, adaptability, and—even in the most precarious times—stability. This year, more than any previous challenge we have collectively faced, the COVID-19 crisis has tested our organizational adaptability and resilience.

We are glad to report that, despite the level of uncertainty that COVID-19 has introduced into our lives and the fact that our staff has worked almost entirely remotely since March, Experimental Station’s organizational model has proven its worth. While some of our cultural programming became either impossible or moved to a virtual format, new programs have emerged while other programs are serving more people than ever.

As you will see in these pages, the needs of 2020 have brought new opportunities, partnerships and collaborations, have forced changes that turned out to be enhancements, and have produced new ways of working that we will carry forward.

Looking to the future, deeply rooted in and committed to the place we serve, Experimental Station will build further on what we have built in the past and learned this year. This is not a moment to look backward with longing for a lost world, but to feel our way forward with courage and creativity. We hope that you will be there with us.

Sincerely,
Connie Spreen

Include Experimental Station in Your Will or Living Trust

Experimental Station is working to build a future we want our children to live in. You can help create that future by including Experimental Station in your will or living trust. A gift through your will or living trust will give you the potential to support our work through a larger gift than you could during your lifetime.

Make a Tax-Deductible Gift of Securities This Year

Experimental Station is now able to accept donations of stock and mutual funds! If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation, avoid capital gains taxes on appreciated stock or mutual funds this year, AND enable Experimental Station to expand our work and impact even more, please contact Executive Director, Connie Spreen, at connie@experimentalstation.org.

The way we were... artist-in-residence Dorothée Munyaneza, and her family joined several from the building for a game of bowling on their last night in Chicago, back in December 2019.
Experimental Station has long benefited from the steady and generous presence of Corey Chatman, our Link Up Illinois and City Farmers Market EBT Senior Program Manager from 2012-2020. A seasoned manager, Corey has been a key factor in the expansion of our Link Up Illinois program across the state and our successful and ongoing work with the City’s farmers markets. This summer, Corey was promoted to become Experimental Station’s first Deputy Director of Operations, overseeing management of all of our programs. Congratulations, Corey!

Becca Hall has earned her role as our new Development Associate. Hired in May to support our Link Up Illinois virtual fundraiser, Becca has become an essential member of the development team, entering and managing our Salesforce donor data, providing technical support for our virtual fundraising events, supporting our Grants and Development Manager, and generally making herself so valuable, we would be stuck without her!

We are delighted to welcome back to the team Dennis Ryan, our new Link Up Illinois Senior Program Manager. Dennis was employed by Experimental Station from 2008-2011 as our 61st Street Farmers Market Manager. In that role, he helped to create our in-school food education program, launch our work with the City’s farmers markets, and get our Link Up Illinois program off the ground. After eight years working in the corporate world, most recently as Director of Risk Management at Honeywell International (2014-2019) and Peace Corps volunteer teaching English to children in Samoa (2019-2020). We are excited to have his extraordinary skill set, outgoing personality, and commitment to our mission as we expand Link Match nutrition incentives to grocery stores and other new venues!

A Blackstone Bicycle Works alum, Joshua Fort was hired by Experimental Station early in the year to help support Blackstone’s refurbished bike production. Josh never ceases to impress by his maturity and commitment to the shop. Over the course of the year, he has also become an invaluable member of the team. We look forward to seeing Josh’s continued growth as he plays an increasingly prominent role at Blackstone!

In February, Matthew Searle, our Assistant Director, left us to become the ED of Elsewhere, a museum and art center in Greensboro, NC!

Although she has yet to work at Experimental Station, Elizabeth Lerum has been working for Experimental Station since June as our first Grants and Development Manager. With a Master’s Degree in Social Sciences, we are thrilled that Elizabeth brings an interest in anthropology and sociology along with her impressive skills as a grant writer, development manager, and PowerPoint creator! Already, Elizabeth has succeeded in formalizing our Engagement Committee structure, a critical step on the path to achieving the exciting things we aim to achieve in coming years!

While a University of Chicago student, Shannon Davis has made herself essential—and much loved—at Experimental Station. Over the past several years, she has supported our Market’s Carnegie School gardening program as assistant instructor and provided invaluable operational assistance of all kinds. Unfortunately for her, we hope that she will never graduate from college and leave us!
2020 has been a unique year. While the coronavirus has complicated our lives, changed our best laid plans, and limited our activities, Blackstone’s young people continue to move forward, gaining new skills and building on the skills they learned and the confidence they gained during their time with us.

In March, Blackstone Bicycle Works closed our shop as we shifted our programming to a virtual format, offering online workshops and classes to 25 youth participants. Youths received basic tool sets and supplies to enable them to participate in online classes. While able to engage each participant for 1.5 to 2 hours at a time, we learned from this shift that there are clear gaps in access to computers and reliable internet access, impacting our youths’ ability to succeed academically and to remain in step with their more affluent peers.

To promote ongoing engagement, we adjusted our summer programming to be youth-guided, incorporating youths’ interests in the content of our classes. Classes included: bike safety and exploration, the physics of bikes (developed and taught by University of Chicago Physics Department graduate students), ACE engineering and design, career and college readiness, food and wellness, and bike-related art and design.

This fall, we are returning our focus to academic wellness check-ins, open shop instruction hours for introductory and advanced bicycle mechanics, and a youth-led civic engagement project that harnessed our youths’ expertise as young cyclists and citizens. This fall’s project focused on increasing access to cycling on the South Side. Additionally, looking to give youths more opportunities to leave their screens and safely engage with their outdoor environments, Kejuan, a bike shop alum, led a youth ride club, offering virtual rides, training videos, lessons on safe cycling practices, and support for participants interested in doing family or solo rides.

Given the various challenges of this past year, we are moving into 2021 with creative solutions for how we will continue to support our youths and enable them to engage meaningfully with their peers, mentors, and bikes!
Supporting Emerging Artists

Seeking to provide a structure to support emerging artists on the South Side, Experimental Station created, this past spring, an Arts Advisory Council (AAC), a volunteer group of artist and creatives with a demonstrated commitment to their artistic forms and practices. All of the artists and creatives participating in the AAC have hosted exhibits, events and performances at Experimental Station and value the “independent spirit,” space, and collaboration of Experimental Station as vital in bringing their—and others’—ideas and programs from concept to reality.

Current AAC members include Julian T. Otis (Tenor), Jovan Landry (multi-media artist), Wisdom Baty (multiple-media visual artist), Michelle E.L. Merritt (arts advocate and administrator), Jared Brown (interdisciplinary artist and DJ), Elysia Banks (dancer and artistic director), and Anayansi Ricketts (multi-media artist/photographer).

In response to the ongoing social disruptions and COVID-19, the Arts Advisory Council hosted two virtual events entitled, “How Do Black Artists Sing in a Strange Land?” that included performances by each artist. AAC is excited about the opportunity to continue expanding and producing quality arts programming at Experimental Station. The virtual events were supported by a grant from the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation.

Michelle E.L. Merritt, AAC administrator, believes “It is critical for artists to have welcoming independent community spaces. Experimental Station is providing a unique opportunity for artists to engage each other and the community. It is exciting to support this reciprocal exchange, as I believe it will further elevate and enrich the artistic experience for everyone.”

Market Box: A Critical Resource for the South Side!

Market Box began in April 2020 as an emergency COVID-19 response, with a goal of crowdfunding just 100 boxes of locally farmed food to support local farmers and our neighbors in Woodlawn. Due to a surge of support and unrelenting demand, we have continued all summer making more than 5000 deliveries to over 800 households across the South Side.

Market Box sources produce, eggs, and bread from over 20 local family and community farms. Donations to the project simultaneously provide free high-quality food in areas where access is scarce, and support small farms that have suffered from shuttered farmers markets and restaurants.

The project is a collaboration with Star Farm and a cohort of civic organizations at the Experimental Station, including Experimental Station, Invisible Institute, Build Coffee, and South Side Weekly. Throughout the summer months, 200 households per week received a Market Box, delivered to their door. With the ongoing crisis, we are continuing to fundraise to serve our network of approximately 400 families through October.

Every Thursday and Friday, volunteers came to pack and deliver bags of fresh fruit and vegetables! These photos of Market Box in action were taken by Davon, a barista at Build Coffee and layout editor at the South Side Weekly!
This past winter was Build Coffee’s busiest in its three year history: the shop launched the second season of its Meal Based Residency, catered events across Hyde Park and Woodlawn, and packed the house regularly enough to space-share with the South Side Weekly office next door.

When the pandemic hit, Build closed its doors. Build’s community responded in force, funding a GoFundMe to support the Build team and buying gift cards to help tide the shop over. That same community welcomed the shop back this summer: Build has operated a Wednesday to Sunday walk-up window since July. Build has also shifted book sales online via Bookshop.org, an independent alternative to Amazon that supports small shops across the US. In collaboration with 57th St. Wines, the shop offers monthly take-home dinners sourced from the 61st St. Farmers Market.

Build was a primary partner in the Market Box project, which delivered local food to 800 families over the course of this summer and fall. Look for more projects this winter as the shop finds ways to take care of each other in this unprecedented time.

Civic Projects has been engaged in a variety of work this past year. The team recently finished an extensive renovation of a home in the Lincoln Park neighborhood, and continues to work on the design for GCE Lab School, a nonprofit high school with a sustainability-driven curriculum. In Bronzeville, Civic is finishing up construction on a 10 unit mixed-use building on Cottage Grove, restoring the “ghost signs” on the existing brick to pay homage to the site’s rich history. This past August, the team of Civic Projects and Landon Bone Baker were invited to join the prequalification list for the Invest South / West Initiative. In partnership with Wrightwood 659, Civic Projects curated a series of videos to promote the upcoming exhibit on architect B.V. Doshi’s work on livable cities. Monica joins three Chicago natives—Asiaha Butler, Edra Soto, and Natalie Moore—to reflect on their engagement with Doshi’s approach to low cost housing and vernacular architecture.

The paper covered news and culture across a wide range of issues this past year: illegal evictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine DJ sessions, U. of C. student protesters’ week-long occupation in front of an administrator’s house, a new ash tree sculpture in Jackson Park, and the renovation of Muddy Waters’ house in North Kenwood.

The paper also won a statewide prize from the Illinois Press Association for Samantha Smylie’s profile of 92-year-old neighborhood barber Robert Hunter.

In October, Christian Belanger took over from Randall Weissman as editor of the paper, while Jason Schumer began as publisher. (Jason is also the managing director at the South Side Weekly.)
Invisible Institute

This year the Invisible Institute celebrated their fifth anniversary and the expansion of our team—by welcoming back Andrew Fan as director of operations and Trina Reynolds-Tyler as director of data after they both finished their graduate programs in public policy.

Invisible Institute began the year by closing the Six Durations of a Split Second: The Killing of Harith Augustus exhibit, hosted in partnership with Peterman Studio/monk parakeet for the Chicago Architecture Biennial.

In March, after three years of co-investigating the murder of Courtney Copeland with his mother, Shapearl Wells, they released the Somebody podcast, in which Shapearl narrates her experience confronting law enforcement and navigating racial disparities as she seeks justice for her son. Recently, they launched a companion teaching guide for the podcast, and accepted an award for Best Serialized Story in the 2020 Third Coast/Richard H. Driehaus Foundation Competition. Produced in partnership with Topic Studios, The Intercept, Tenderfoot TV, and iHeart Radio, the podcast has accrued over one million downloads.

In response to the pandemic, they collaborated with colleagues at Build Coffee, the Experimental Station, and South Side Weekly to create Market Box, a mutual aid initiative to deliver fresh food and critical information to 400 households per month across the South Side. They also designed the You Are Not Alone program, a summer jobs program that employed over 200 Chicago Public Schools students to remotely conduct oral history interviews with senior residents in Chicago Housing Authority.

Their investigations unit collaborated on a national series on the use of police canines as weapons, which has thus far resulted in Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department, the department they found has the highest rate of police dog bites, announcing new restrictions on canine use of force. Their wrongful convictions unit published an investigation into Robert Johnson’s case in The Daily Beast; Johnson will be getting an evidentiary hearing. And, 16 Shots, a film on the police murder of Laquan McDonald co-produced by the Invisible Institute, received the 2020 Emmy Award for Outstanding Investigative Documentary.

City Bureau

In 2020, City Bureau moved to its new headquarters at the historic Overton Hygienic Building in Bronzeville. Though COVID-19 prevented them from opening their doors to the community, they’re hopeful they’ll be able to do it soon. In April, they launched the Chicago COVID Resource Finder, a data bank of over 1,300 neighborhood, city, country and state resources that can be filtered so people can easily find what they need. In June, City Bureau and WBEZ published a report that revealed massive racial disparities in home lending in Chicago. The report led to an announcement by Chase Bank that it would invest an additional $600 million in Black and Latinx communities over five years. In September, Documenters launched in Cleveland adding to a growing network with sites in Chicago and Detroit. Programs inspired by these are also underway and in development in Fresno and Omaha. This year also marks City Bureau’s 5 year anniversary, a milestone they’re celebrating with their virtual Soapbox 2020 event on December 10.

South Side Weekly

At the end of 2019, the Weekly—a volunteer-run newsroom since 2013—hired its first editor-in-chief, Jackie Serrato, and managing editor, Martha Bayne. Both came onboard with a desire to do extensive community outreach and develop new reporters from South Side neighborhoods.

From the pandemic, to the uprisings, to the election, 2020 was a difficult and unpredictable year, but Jackie and Martha were able to switch gears as needed to put out timely, practical, and critical coverage.

Despite new challenges brought on by COVID-19, the Weekly continued to print their free, bi-weekly paper and were able to partner with community organizations to deliver thousands of papers directly to South Side homes during the height of the first wave of the pandemic.

The Weekly expanded their reporting budget to better track how COVID-19 was disproportionately impacting South Side communities. They put together an extensive community resource guide and built an online tool to track COVID-19-related deaths by neighborhood in order to better visualize how the illness moved along racial and geographic lines.

When thousands of residents poured into the streets downtown to protest the killing of George Floyd and the legacy of police brutality and white supremacy in policing across the country, the Weekly team spoke with dozens of witnesses to meticulously document the brutal and disproportionate response from the Chicago Police Department.

The Weekly also began translating their coverage after they heard from community members that they were having a difficult time finding reliable information in Spanish. The Weekly’s website now has its own front-page section “en español.”
Blackstone Bicycle Works Outdoor Makeover

Thanks to a partnership with ACE (Architecture, Construction, Engineering) Mentor Program, 11 of our Blackstone Bicycle Works summer youth program participants were able to help redesign our outdoor work space. Over seven weeks, Blackstone youths met virtually with ACE interns and mentors working in STEM professions to guide the redesign process, while broadening their understanding of engineering and learning to use SketchUp modeling software.

The result of the ACE partnership is a beautiful, rebuilt outdoor classroom and workspace with a concrete-surfaced, canopied work area, and inviting seating with planters for kids and customers. We are sincerely grateful to the ACE program and to the skilled contractors who donated their time and materials!

Growing Food and Friendship

For the past five years, Experimental Station has utilized the Jackson Park Terrace (JPT) hoop house on Stony Island to provide our 61st Street Farmers Market gardening instruction. Expertly managed and tended by Brendon Stutzman, horticulturist and professional landscaper, the ‘hoop’ has become a community generator, as well as a source of gardening instruction and healthy food for JPT gardeners and residents.

Again this year, the Market provided ten garden plots for JPT residents to grow their own fruits and vegetables and offered weekly ‘Harvest Days,’ whereby JPT residents could stop by and pick up free garden-grown produce. Over the course of the summer, the hoop produced and made available more than 150 grocery bags of organically grown vegetables to more than 40 families!

JPT residents—whether gardening themselves or partaking in Harvest Days—have shared with us that the hoop has also provided fertile ground for growing new friendships. As one resident shared, “The garden brings people out, and we get to know each other.” Having a place out of doors to enjoy healthy ways with others has perhaps never been so needed.

Essential Work at City Markets

For more than a decade, Experimental Station has partnered with the City’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) to bring our expertise in providing SNAP/Link service to the City of Chicago’s farmers markets. In so doing, Experimental Station has enabled Link recipients to use their benefits to purchase the foods sold at as many as 22 City-sponsored markets.

2020 was no different. Our team of seasoned on-site personnel stood up to the coronavirus challenge, donning PPE, as they welcomed Link customers at 11 City farmers markets, processed their Link transactions, and matched those transactions up to $25 per cardholder per day through our Link Up Illinois program.

As a result, despite serving fewer markets than in 2019, despite a later start than in a normal year, and despite the Daley Plaza market (the largest of the City’s markets) not operating this year, Link customer purchases at the City markets held strong, demonstrating the importance of this lifeline to healthy food for many Chicagoans.
Looking Forward to 2021

We had foretold a year ago that 2020 would be a banner year. It has, indeed, been an exceptional year—though certainly not in the way that we had anticipated. As we look forward to 2021, we do so with the understanding that it may be just as unpredictable as the year through which we are now living. Despite that fact, we continue to make best laid plans, while allowing for contingencies and plenty of adaptation. Here are some of the plans we have laid for the year ahead:

- Experimental Station is actively planning for expansion! 2021 will see us launch a capital campaign to construct a second building next door. We aim to create more space for Blackstone Bicycle Works, for new arts and media programming, and for other non-profits seeking to join our mutually supportive community. We can’t wait to unveil the beautiful design we have in the works!

- In partnership with Lyft/Divvy, our Blackstone Bicycle Works program will develop a new ride marshal training curriculum to teach groups how to ride safely on Chicago streets.

- Link Up Illinois will expand Link Match to grocery stores on Chicago’s south and west sides, in addition to providing Link Match to farmers markets and food co-ops throughout the state.

- Our Fresh Food from Farmers of Color 2020 grantees will carry out their projects to provide more fresh produce to residents in our south and west side neighborhoods.

- Our 61st Street Farmers Market will offer a Market Vendor Training Course for young people from the South Side, teaching them how to become sellers at farmers markets. We will also provide gardening instruction, free weekly distribution of fresh vegetables, and a weekly Market Shuttle for Jackson Park Terrace and other local residents to get to and from the Market.

Support Our Work

It is only with the financial support of our community that Experimental Station is able to do all that we do. If ever there was a year that has borne that out, it is 2020; the success alone of our Market Box initiative is attributable to the thousands of individual donors who made it happen. Years like 2020 demonstrate that both our stability and our agility are ensured by the gifts of our generous donors.

Experimental Station is also supported by the generous volunteers who give us the gift of their time. Our 61st Street Farmers Market and Blackstone Bicycle Works are especially grateful for our volunteer support. If you would like to volunteer, learn more at exp.st/volunteer.

We also welcome in-kind donations. Whether it be your expertise, laptop computers, office supplies, bikes or parts, or gear for our Blackstone Bicycle Works cyclocross team, we welcome your generosity!

Please consider making a tax-deductible gift to Experimental Station to support our programs. You can donate at exp.st/donate or via check to Experimental Station.

Thanks to a matching pledge, your end-of-year gift will be doubled!
# Grants, Individual Donors, and Foundation Support

**November 2019 – October 2020**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount Range</th>
<th>Donors</th>
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<td><strong>$750,000+</strong></td>
<td>Illinois Department of Human Services &amp; Catholic Charities, USDA Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program (GusNIP)</td>
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<td><strong>$75,000 - $150,000</strong></td>
<td>The Builders Initiative, Chicago Region Food Systems Fund, City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, The Greer Foundation, USDA FMPP</td>
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our mission

The Experimental Station is an independent, not-for-profit incubator of innovative cultural projects and small-scale enterprises. It seeks to maintain a diverse and interdisciplinary balance of participants and activities. Areas of primary interest include, but are not limited to, art, ecology, food culture, cultural criticism, independent publishing, and alternative models of education.

In addition to the Experimental Station’s own range of programs, its facilities provide essential resources enabling new, vulnerable initiatives to stabilize and flourish. These resources include: workspaces at discounted rents, information networks, tools, and technical support.

support and donation

Please consider helping us build the Experimental Station into a more sustainable operation by making a financial contribution. More information and a credit card donation form can be found online at: exp.st/donate.

Blackstone Bicycle Works accepts donations of used bicycles, parts, equipment, and tools. Drop off any donations at the shop during normal business hours: 12-6:30 PM, Monday-Friday.

Volunteers are vital to the success of our programs. If you are interested in supporting our programs as a volunteer, contact us at info@experimentalstation.org.

visit the station

The Experimental Station is located in Woodlawn at 6100 S. Blackstone Ave., south of Hyde Park and the University of Chicago. We are located near Metra stations and CTA #2, #6, #59 buses. The building is wheelchair accessible. For more information contact us at:

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