



WORCESTER
**YOUTH
CENTER**

2019
ANNUAL REPORT



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The youth artwork featured in this report was created by participants in the YouthReach Arts program from 2012-2019.

COVER

Jennessa Burks, *Healing Hearts*



NOT JUST A PLACE...

But a Family

At 2 p.m. most weekday afternoons, the pace picks up at the Worcester Youth Center. Youth members come in, check in, have a snack and start their program activities.

But since mid-March that's all happened on screen instead of in person. Our Zoom check-in session starts with everyone giving themselves a hug. Try it – you'll see it can really change your mood.

For our members without access to technology, we bridged the digital divide by supplying 25 tablets to youth to keep them connected. Those connections have enabled us to continue much of our programming without missing a beat. The youth have benefited from the structure and consistency we could offer. I am proud of the way our staff embraced the changes and revamped their youth work approaches to this new form of digital delivery and interaction.

Looking back to the pre-COVID world in 2019, we celebrated our 25th anniversary with an energetic celebration at Worcester's Redemption Rock brewery. Mayor Joe Petty presented longtime board chair Laurie Ross with a key to the city.

Only two weeks before the party began, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health awarded us an \$800,000 Gun Violence Prevention grant. This is something we have worked toward for several years, and it was a solid affirmation of our youth development model at the state level. It's been quite a journey.

The grant has opened the door to new partnerships, including one with Jorge Sierra, owner of MVP Barbershop and victim of gun violence years ago, who describes his experience in talks with youth.

As last year came to a close, our ramped-up outreach and recruitment efforts resulted in close to 50 youth coming into our building most days. One attraction has been our variety of programs, including cooking, sound recording and dance. Recent renovations to those spaces in our building will enable us to deliver new ways of developing youth skills for jobs and for life.

With our silver anniversary year behind us, and a new world of connections underway, we appreciate your continued support of our work to provide a community that embraces Worcester's youth.

Sincerely,
Samuel Martin, *Executive Director*



We bridged the digital divide by supplying 25 tablets to youth to keep them connected.

MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS,

Positive Change

DPH programs help younger teens find their voices, speak to community



For girls ages 12-14, the Teen Circle program at the Worcester Youth Center offers a way for them to understand themselves and their community. Each school year, their conversations expand from the individual to the wider world, choosing a community topic to study through an outreach project.

The 15 students at Sullivan Middle School were going to help the city's homeless. Then the world changed.

Instead, the group created a public service video to encourage wearing masks and gloves to fight COVID-19. Their catchy music video features the refrain "We want our summer back," urging everyone to follow public health guidelines to reduce the virus' spread.

Debuted June 18, 2020, during the Center's HopeVID-2020 event, the video has garnered media attention with its call to "Wear your mask/Wear your gloves/Sanitize! Sanitize!"

The video was the product of months of conversations, using the Valuing Our Insights for Civic Engagement (VOICES) and Teen Outreach

Program (TOP) curricula funded through the Massachusetts Department of Health's Strive grant. The grant's goal, as Teen Circle facilitator and Director of Creative Leadership and Organizational Innovation Nydia Colón explains, is "to empower our young people to occupy meaningful spaces with meaningful conversations."

First in person, then through twice-a-week online conversations, the girls now think more critically, equipped to speak out on behavior and social change, says Nydia.

"Sometimes we don't give our youth enough credit," but in the Center's safe spaces, "they go on to discover things on their own. That discovery makes me feel that we've accomplished our mission."

The Strive grant also funds the Adolescent Sex Education (ASE) program. Tailored to help youth ages 12-15 make safer, healthier decisions, ASE uses the Get Real curriculum to offer "facts, not the internet," says Cassie Giardina, program coordinator.

During the summer of 2019, she reached out to nearly every group that serves youth in the city. Collaborating with the Plumley Village outreach coordinator in the fall, they went door to door to invite youth to join a co-ed group. By January 2020, nine youth met regularly in the Teen Spot. At the Youth Center, 14 to 15 girls gathered.

Discussions went beyond the standard school health curriculum to address gender and sexual identity, healthy relationships, and ways to deter bullying with a supportive school environment. A socially distanced pizza party marked the program's successful conclusion in June.

“VIOLENCE IS NOT NORMAL” MESSAGE FOR

Gun Violence Prevention

A high school student traumatized by a deadly shooting became one of the Worcester Youth Center's success stories, thanks to a state Gun Violence Prevention grant that views violence as a disease.

Through the grant, the Youth Center is working on a public information campaign that violence is not normal and that “just because you grow up in a certain neighborhood, it’s not OK that people get shot or stabbed,” said Roberto Diaz, Director of Community Engagement and Social Services.

“We have young people who have been shot multiple times, we have young people who have seen friends shot in front of them,” Roberto said.

The Gun Violence Prevention grant will enable Center staff to guide and mentor youth with these experiences. Staff helped the traumatized youth stay in school and gain job skills.

The two-year, \$800,000 Massachusetts Department of Public Health Gun Violence Prevention grant took effect July 1, 2019. The Youth Center was one of 10 community organizations awarded a total of more than \$8 million in May 2019 to prevent gun violence among youth.

Worcester is considered a safe city, but after a spike in youth violence in 2015, the Worcester Youth Violence Prevention Initiative (WYVPI) was formed to study the problem. A 2018 Youth Assessment report found that gun and knife violence had decreased by 28 percent since 2015 and the number of incident-involved youth under age 25 had decreased by 24 percent. Violent crimes rose again in Worcester in summer 2020. Youth Center and city officials have worked together to address this.

Designed to provide positive intervention with youth to reduce gun violence, the grant allows an embedded clinician at the Youth Center to help with psychological issues.

As a first step, staff reached out to about 100 youth through December 2019 at police-sponsored and sporting events and identified 40 to 50 youth at high risk for gun violence.

While Youth Center staff expected to work closely with 25 of those youth, pandemic-related changes reduced that number to 10. High-risk youth can remain in the program until age 24.

The second step was to evaluate the Youth Center’s risk assessment tools. The staff used the Shannon Community Safety Initiative, which fights gang and youth violence, and Ohio Risk Assessment System questions for the updates. UTEC, Inc., in Lowell provided technical support.

Even working remotely, Youth Center staff continue to participate in grant-sponsored weekly youth development trainings provided by the Department of Public Health.

The grant has led to partnerships with other organizations, such as Unity Radio, which is producing a series about the Youth Center.

The 2020 public information campaign is exciting, said Roberto. “Violence isn’t normal, and we want to find a cure for this disease.”



Violence isn't normal, and we want to find a cure for this disease.

A PLACE FOR

Relationships

Laurie Ross has been connected to the Worcester Youth Center almost as long as its 25-year history.



She first learned about the Youth Center's work as a consultant on youth involvement in community planning. After graduating from Clark University with a master's degree in International Development and Social Change in 1995, Laurie participated in the Worcester Family Research Project, a longitudinal study of hundreds of low-income and homeless families.

Her Ph.D. program in public policy at UMass Boston was underway when Cathy Recht, R.N., an adult adviser and mediator at the Center's first Main Street location, asked her to coordinate the Healthy Options for Prevention and Education (HOPE) Coalition.

HOPE Coalition's activities brought Laurie to the Center, then at 27

Chandler St. She had heard about the work Executive Director Adolfo Arrastia was doing there and knew that was where she wanted to do her doctoral research.

She began the Urban Community Action Planning for Teens (UCAPT) program in 1999, organizing two groups of 15 Center members to assess their communities. Each group organized a project addressing a specific challenge. The first group worked to close the bar located next door to the Center, creating a safer environment for youth. The second group created a documentary to raise awareness of life in the inner city, "Through Our Eyes."

"The original design of my research was to run each group for three months, but they ended up lasting for years due to the relationships we formed with each other," she said.

Within months of receiving her doctoral degree in 2002, Laurie joined the Youth Center's board of directors. She became chair in 2007 and led the group until 2018. As Clark's Professor of Community Development and Planning, she brought her direct youth experience and youth development research to board conversations and decision making.

"Adolfo taught me so much, as did youth leaders Jason Perez and Manny Guerra," she said. "So many youth workers want things to be really clear cut, but Adolfo taught me about the gray areas. It's a different logic to accept youth even if you don't always understand where they are coming from. You need spaces like the Youth Center to see kids and accept them."

Over the years, the Youth Center has evolved from serving as a drop-in site, a safe space for everyone, including gang-involved youth, to a place with more structured programs focusing on education, self-awareness and job training. The 2019 Gun Violence Prevention grant from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health validated the Center's vital role in the city's youth development, she said, now seen as key to public health outcomes.

Reflecting on the recent HopeVid-2020 presentation created by Center youth in response to the pandemic challenges, she said it made her "very, very proud. It's a great confirmation that we're still an important place for young people." Addressing Youth Center members, she said, "You need to have a place where you know you matter — the Youth Center is definitely such a place."

You need spaces like the Youth Center to see kids and accept them.

A PLACE TO

Be Heard

Jennessa Burks found her second home at the Worcester Youth Center.

“It was a place where I felt welcomed, listened to,” she said. “It was a safe place to recharge during the day.” Like many youth, she would leave home in the morning for school and not return until evening. It was a place where she had many roles, including participating in groups, assisting the youth coordinator and attending board meetings.

And it was a place that gave her fond memories — like shooting hoops at the Boston Garden during her first Celtics game — while on a Youth Center field trip.

Today, Jennessa, a first-generation college graduate, teaches all subjects to fourth graders in the Cambridge Public Schools. An educator, mentor and past youth activism supervisor, she attended Quinsigamond Community College and transferred to Worcester State University, where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Elementary Education and was the first graduate of the Mathematics for Elementary Education degree program. She went on to earn a master’s degree in Prevention Science and Practice from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Realizing she never saw herself represented in art, she also became an artist, working in acrylic. Art is a passion for Jennessa, enabling her to show her emotions, amplify voices and capture the beauty, strength and resilience of people of color, she said. Young people need the opportunity to express creatively things they care about.

That was why she recently reconnected with the Youth Center to participate in HopeVid-2020, a youth arts-focused exploration of pandemic experiences.

In high school, her mentors came from outside school, Jennessa said. She became involved with the Youth Center as a sophomore when Roberto Diaz and Xavier Johnson moved to new positions at the Youth Center.

“One reason I kept going is the mentors really listened to you,” she said, citing another mentor, Rebecca Dezan.

Though she had a 3.7 GPA and was an honors student throughout high school, Jennessa’s guidance counselor told her applying to Worcester State University would be a stretch. Her experience demonstrated that while youth in Worcester have potential, they don’t always receive guidance to know what they can reach for in life or the support needed to achieve those goals.

“As a young person, I realized the importance of relationships and connections with encouraging adults,”

Jennessa said. Grateful for the experiences she had at the Youth Center, she said, “I grew as a person and developed stronger skills that helped me in my path to adulthood.” These ultimately led to her career as a classroom teacher.

She advises Youth Center members, even if it doesn’t feel true at the moment, “to understand the power you hold as young people and how, working together, you have the ability to create change in your community.”



*You have
the ability
to create
change
in your
community.*

YOUR INVESTMENT IN Our Work

Support for the Worcester Youth Center is an investment in our collective future. For more than 20 years, the Center's work has created positive change for thousands of young people, encouraging new directions and better life decisions. Your contributions have had a significant impact on our community. We remain grateful for your confidence and continuing support.

Statement of Financial Position — December 31, 2019

Assets

Current Assets	
Cash and equivalents	\$267,487
Grants and contracts receivable	\$76,599
Prepaid expenses	\$23,229
Total Current Assets	\$367,315
Investments	\$607,701
Property and equipment, net	\$855,713
Total Assets	\$1,830,729

Liabilities and Net Assets

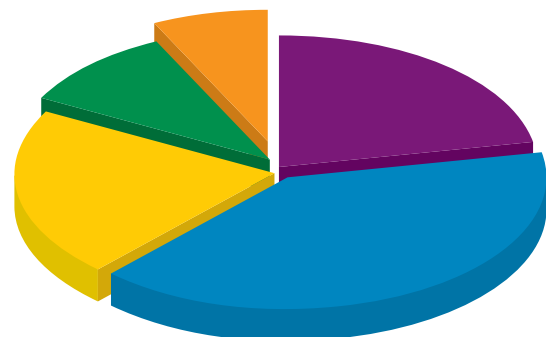
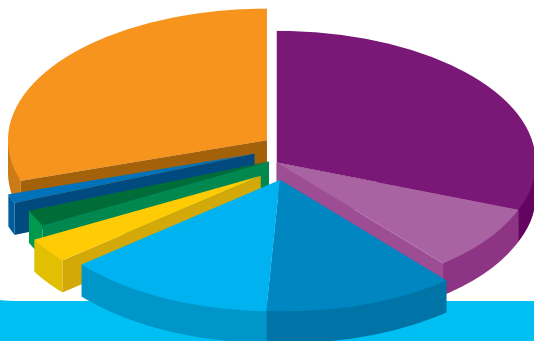
Current Liabilities	
Accounts payable	\$41,236
Accrued expenses	\$70,561
Total Liabilities	\$111,797
Net Assets	
Without donor restrictions	\$1,549,828
With donor restrictions	\$169,104
Total Net Assets	\$1,718,932
Total Liabilities and Net Assets	\$1,830,729

REVENUE Year ending December 31, 2019

Grants and contracts	\$491,905
Temporarily restricted	\$104,000
Contributions	\$154,104
Temporarily restricted	\$168,226
Contributions in-kind	\$39,690
Other income	\$14,718
Special events, net expenses \$1,205	\$6,235
Net assets released from restriction	\$474,215
Total Revenue and Support	\$978,878

EXPENSES Year ending December 31, 2019

Creative leadership	\$212,516
Health and wellness	\$393,525
Career and education	\$206,104
Management and general	\$101,462
Fundraising	\$63,792
Total Expenses	\$977,399



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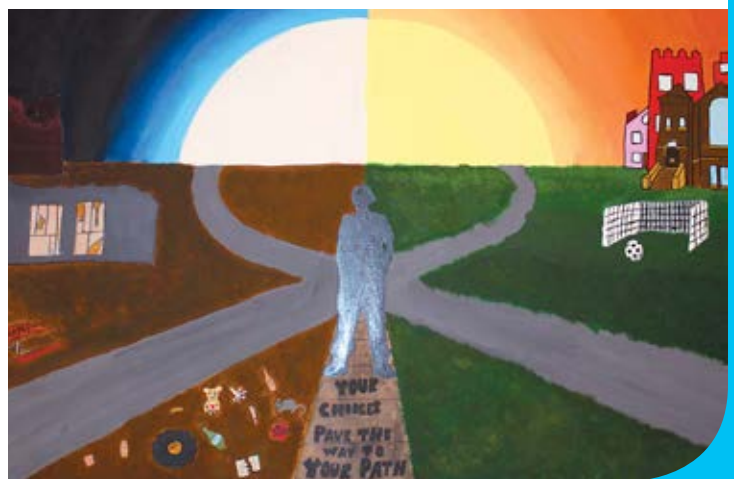
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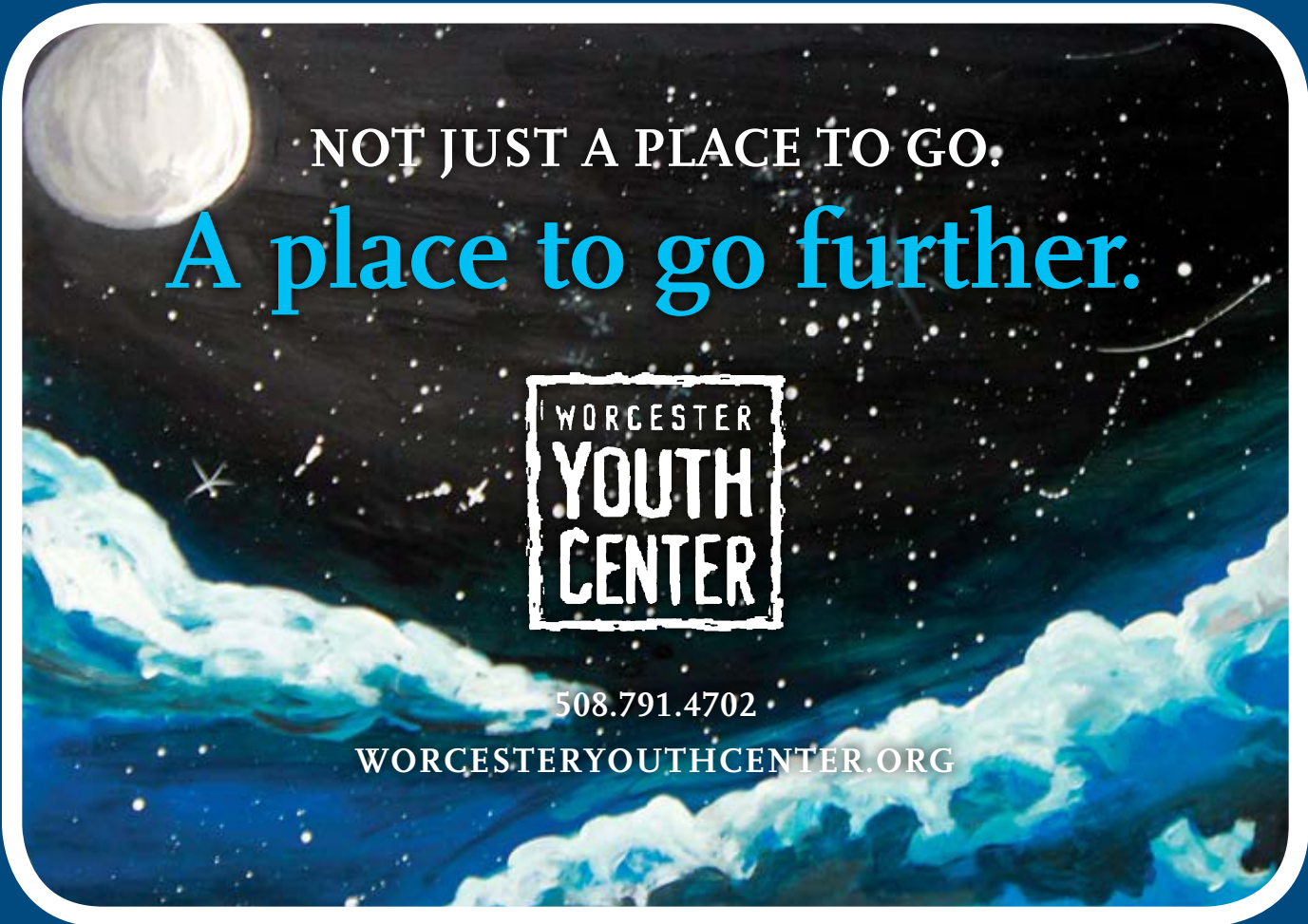
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NOT JUST A PLACE TO GO.

A place to go further.



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