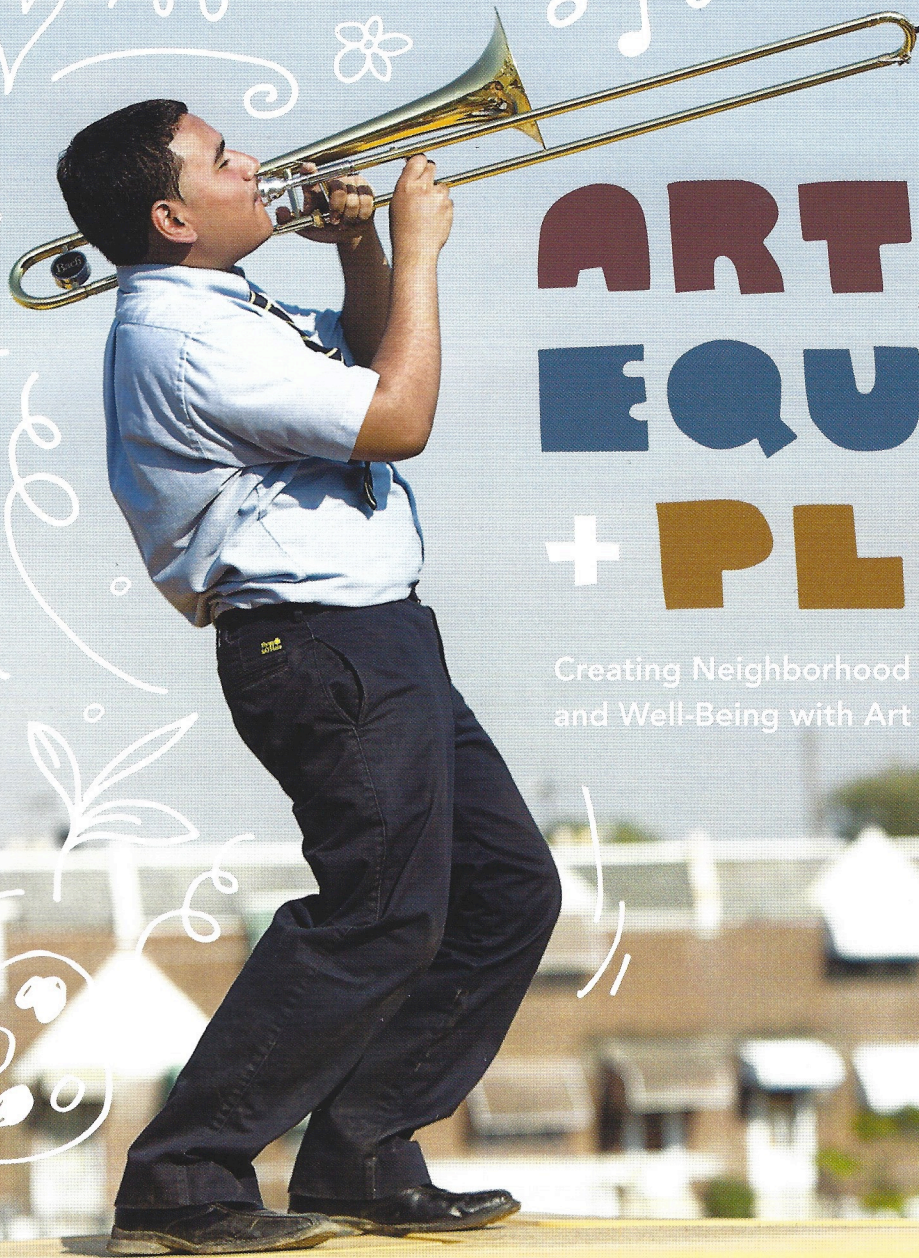


PACDC

2018

PHILADELPHIA ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS

Esperanza
Academy student
giving an impromptu
performance.



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This is Where We Live: Stories of Art and Community

BY PAMELA BRIDGEFORTH



Artist rendering of Esperanza's \$6 million performing arts space.

Philadelphia is home to some of the world's most exquisite and innovative art on stage, in museums and gallery spaces, along bucolic riverside hiking paths, and in neighborhoods where art critics don't typically frequent. The art happening at the neighborhood level typically is not produced as art for art's sake, but rather as a process and a tool for a community to re-envision itself to say I (we) live here—I matter and where I live matters.

Across PACDC's membership in neighborhoods on the rise and those just emerging, communities are embracing this work and using it to transform or uplift not just physical spaces, but also the collective vision for the neighborhood of people who live there. In the stories detailed here you will learn about just a few large and small groups partnering with artists, educators, and many others working in a variety of ways: educating young people in school and out, bringing diverse ethnic communities together to learn from each other while supporting local small business, hip hop artists, boxers and neighborhood revitalizers working together to give back to their community, and a long-neglected Broad Street beauty getting new life and giving new hope to a neighborhood.

These endeavors tell a story of where people live, work, worship, learn and create—they tell a story of Philadelphia. ►



Helping young people find their voices through the power of culture

Tito Puente, musician and composer and arguably the king of Latin music, was often quoted as saying, “If there is no dance, there is (no) music.” We can interpret that quote in many ways, but its essence is that music’s rhythm and energy is predicated on one’s own personal rhythm—the heart, the hips, the soul. You need personal rhythm to make musical rhythm and, ultimately, great music. In community building, it’s important to be grounded in a strong education to help build strong communities. In Hunting Park, along North 5th Street, a faith-based community development organization is educating young people in a range of fine and performing arts to build strong people, and ultimately, a strong community.

“When we talk to community residents about what is important to them and what they want to see in their neighborhood, they say educational activities for young people and arts and culture programs, and because of that we have introduced through our charter school, Esperanza Academy, a range of arts training during the school day as well as after-school through the Esperanza Academy Dance Ensemble,” said Walter Toliver, Senior Vice President and General Counsel at Esperanza USA, the nationally-recognized faith-based Latino action organization.

Students who participate in the Dance Ensemble receive advanced training in technique and performance across a wide array of idioms ranging

from ballet to contemporary. The group tours around the city and region performing at cultural and neighborhood festivals and is a seven time first place honor awardee in Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican Day Parade. When asked recently about the Dance Ensemble’s achievements, the Ensemble’s leader and Esperanza Academy’s Fine Art Chair, Tania Ramos Oton, said, “Our greatest achievement is exposing our students to the different art forms and helping them use it as a platform for self-expression. It doesn’t necessarily mean that they will pursue any of the arts as a career, though some make that choice, but more so as a means for self-discovery and empowerment.”

In addition to Esperanza’s school and after-school programming, the 31-year-old agency also hosts AMLA (Artistas y Musicos Americanos), organizational heir apparent to the nationally recognized Asociacion de Musicos Latino Americanos, the city’s oldest Latino music education and programming resource. Esperanza provides staff support, administrative offices, and classroom space where they conduct training in traditional and contemporary music forms. By the end of 2019, these programs will enjoy expanded space in the form of a new \$6 million renovation of Esperanza’s administrative and school campus to include a 300-seat theater, fine arts gallery, library, and recording studio. “We do this because we believe that our community deserves the same access to high quality programming as you would find at the Kimmel Center,” said Toliver. “Our community deserves high quality programming just like communities closer to Center City.”

Olney Youth Arts Festival performers.



Growing strong together by celebrating diversity

Just 10 or so blocks away from Esperanza, the North 5th Street Revitalization Project (N5RP), a program of the Korean Community Development Services Center, is working with a dedicated group of volunteers and a community-based arts organization to develop and host a range of programming celebrating the most ethnically diverse zip code in the state. “For more than five years now, we’ve partnered with Ambrose Liu and the Olney Culture Lab to brainstorm and work on key projects to help highlight the commercial corridor. The annual Olney Youth Arts Festival is one of the biggest and we know it will grow,” says Stephanie Michel, N5RP’s Director.

The half-day event features dance, music and spoken word performers such as Esperanza Academy Dance Ensemble, Gibson School of Music and Arts, Mutya Philippine Dance Company, North Philly Foot Stompers Drill Team, the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia, Three Aksha Dance Company, and Husnaa Hashim, the 2017-2018 Youth Poet Laureate of Philadelphia, to name but a few, attracting more than 500 neighborhood residents enjoying being together and witnessing young people perform.

“This all started in a small room somewhere in Olney organized by North 5th Street where a few community members said ‘Hey we should organize a cultural festival highlighting all the diversity in the neighborhood.’ From that we began and the rest is history in progress,” says Liu, founder of Olney Culture Lab of Culture Trust Greater Philadelphia and N5RP Advisory Committee member. In addition to Olney Fest, N5RP hosts an open mic night at St. Paul’s Church on the second Friday of the month featuring an Olney-based jazz group, the NewERA Collective; coordinates Jazz on the Green at Fisher Park; and the North 5th Street Ethnic Food Tour. “In the beginning it was a little hard to convince some business owners that the festival was a good thing for the community. They had issues with parking, and some of our vendors blocking loading areas, but now it’s very different, and while not everyone is there yet, more businesses are seeing increased customers and that helps convince other businesses,” says Michel. She went on to add, “Cultural programming is an important component of our work here on North 5th Street.”

Giving back and getting so much more

“I didn’t even know who Peedie Crakk was until the Give Back Day!” Nicetown CDC’s Chief Operating Officer Majeedah Rashid said of the Philly



Olney Youth Arts Festival performers.



Mural in West Philadelphia.

native and rising rap star. “Some local Nicetown residents who were making a name for themselves in rap and hip-hop approached us to say they wanted to give back to the community with a free concert. We said ‘okay’ and the rest is history,” says Rashid of the festival that grew from a half-day concert of hip hop music and dance into a two day happening featuring a range of rhythm and blues, gospel, spoken word, boxing, along with community information tables, and booths attracting over 3,500.

Serving as a focal point for the weekend celebrations which happen in August is the March for Peace, which serves as a poignant but defiant response to neighborhood violence that has taken the lives of many of Nicetown’s brightest. Follow-

ing the march are scholarship presentations to encourage young people to step into their own visions of success for the future. Since 2009, the fund has raised \$6,000 to \$9,000 for student textbook needs each year, and sends at least one bus of high school students on a college tour—feeding and chaperoning 40-45 young people each year.

“It’s funny to think about how something so simple could grow into something that touches so many,” says Rashid. “The Give Back Day continues to give our community a way to come together, but also as a way for people to see the change in the community as we improve it by engaging and partnering with residents and business owners,” she added.