

2020 COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION GRANT

Teen Empowerment's 2020 Youth History Ambassador Project \$2025

Project Report:

⚙ What were you hoping to accomplish?

Our broad goals include(d):

- (1) Youth anchor themselves and their identities to history.
- (2) Center voices of youth and community elders as they build intergenerational relationships/collaboration.
- (3) Bust myths and biased assumptions about how wealth has been built locally and nationally.
- (4) Call-in a core group of institutions to call-in their peers for reflective action through modelling. Influence meaningful dialogue and next steps for solutions that address structural root causes of divestment from the city, hyper-segregation, the Black-White wealth gap in the region, and related consequences.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES:

Via Pre/Post-survey results, YAs demonstrate growth in:

- Skills (research, writing, leadership, public speaking)
- Knowledge of local history + Connections between history & today
- Soft skills (confidence, organizing, communication)
- Intergenerational connections

PROGRESS:

INDIVIDUAL IMPACT

On end-of-year Impact Surveys, 2019-20 youth history ambassadors (YHAs) reported that their work at TE this year has helped them achieve the following:

- 100% built skills in more than one area that prepare them for future careers (leadership, communication, employment, computer, arts, organization, conflict resolution, etc.)
- 100% reported building relationships with both peers and adults they would not otherwise have known
- 100% reported increased self-respect
- 100% reported increased civic engagement and feel they can influence decisions affecting their community
- 100% felt more responsible for the quality of life in their community and will continue to work to improve their community
- 100% felt more comfortable disagreeing with their friends or not following the crowd
- 93% were proud of their work this year
- 93% learned how to speak to adults so that they could be heard and understood
- 86% felt better equipped to avoid violent confrontations
- 75% used feedback skills they learned through TE to resolve or prevent a conflict
- 75% felt better equipped to avoid substance abuse
- 75% improved in their school work

94% of YHAs felt more interested in building intergenerational relationships. Here are some reasons they gave:

- I realized I have a lot more in common with elders than I thought
- Because some of the elders have a big role in Rochester like Dr. Walter Cooper he lived on Clarissa Street and that was a controversial time in Rochester and all around the world and he is still here.

- I got to interview someone from a time before I was even thought of
- The elders have a lot of faith in youth so I will continue to live on their legacies and make them proud.

[See “IHA Phases 1-3 Accomplishments so far” for more evaluative comments by YHAs.](#)

⚙️ Who was touched by your project or program?

COMMUNITY IMPACT

- This summer, TE hired 10 Youth History Ambassadors (YHAs) (all African American, Latinx and/or mixed heritage, ages 14-17) for an intensive 7-week partnership with the Clarissa Street Reunion Committee, RCTV and several other university, library and museum partners. During all other season, we have employed 6-8 YHAs who have demonstrated particular interest and commitment to carry out the longer-range exhibit project.
- **Youth History Ambassadors (YHAs) released our documentary**, featuring 2019 YHA-led oral histories and voiceovers, poetry and beatbox by 2 YHAs. [Here's the teaser](#). The 2020 YHAs hosted and moderated their 90-min [virtual world premiere of *Clarissa Uprooted: Youth & Elders Uncover the Story of Black Rochester*](#) (by itself = 25 mins). The virtual screening, via Rochester’s premier independent movie house The Little Theatre, opened with intergenerational walking poetry along Clarissa St. & ended with a talkback by elders and YHAs featured in our documentary. The premiere was viewed by more than **2,500 people within the first 48 hours and by 100+ people in-person** on the lawn outside Visual Studies Workshop. Also contributed to a new [Spirit of the Pythodd website and facilitated a Zoom reminiscing session](#) with 9 elder jazz enthusiasts.

On average, youth participants rated the YO-led initiatives a 9.3 on a scale of 1-10. And **96% agreed or strongly agreed that “events like this make me more hopeful about my community.”**

INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT (Catalytic & Direct)

- In total, **17 YHA-led oral histories** will become part of Rochester Public Library’s online collection, *Rochester Voices*. YHAs continued (*remotely since March*) working with elders to design an exhibit, including **digging through the [Howard W. Coles Collection archives](#)** at the Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC), to educate Greater Rochester about how this thriving African American community and redlining, restrictive covenants and urban renewal are central to how we became the region we are today.
- The connections between the history of Clarissa St., including the uprising of July 1964 in response to police violence against Black people, and today was inescapable this year. YHAs co-hosted their colleague, Sarah Adams’ *Black Students Matter* rally, march and impromptu teach-ins connecting the dots with history, policies and impact of local Black Rochester. Several participated in BLM marches throughout the summer and fall.
- YOs/YHAs’ work featured in **32 media stories** illuminating contemporary issues. TE’s **2020 Awards**: Matchstick Prize; Ames Amzalak Award for Nonprofit Excellence; Alliance for Quality Education partner award with Community Task Force on School Climate; helped City of Rochester win 2020 All-America City Award.

Investment in the Intergenerational History Ambassadors Project has also contributed to TE’s staff development and leadership ladder that brings former TE Youth Organizers (YOs) into adult staff positions. This has both the impact of capacity-building for TE as we grow, and is part of our racial equity work to move former YOs into leadership positions in the organization. Je’Carl Hill, TE’s newest Associate Coordinator, had been cheated out of the depth of training/experience he would have gotten had the pandemic not disrupted his YO group, just 2 months into his new position. He and the YO group finished the year remotely, but the summer Youth History Ambassador project enabled him to really dig in and do a mix of remote & in-person (outdoor) work with the YHAs.

Shanterra Randle-Mitchum, also a former YO, was the lead Program Coordinator on the project. She is an effective mentor and is exploring a possible leadership role in TE. As well, because we hire the YHAs through the City of Rochester's Summer of Opportunities program, youth are from all over the city, including connecting us with Eastside youth before we began outreach for our new Eastside site this year. So the YHA program also has acted as a capacity-building incubator for TE. Moreover, we have developed all sorts of collaborative relationships with museums, the library system and different parts of the universities than we have had as we gear up for this exhibit.

☀ **How did this grant energize or transform your congregation or community?**

We couldn't have imagined or predicted this, but it turns out that the Intergenerational History Ambassadors (IHA) project was made for this moment. The IHA was the flipside of much of the ugliness of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic isolated especially elders while disconnecting youth from school. The ongoing pandemic of systemic racism brought us face-to-face with the consequences of US policies since the beginning of our history on the health, housing and employment disparities and the violence and dehumanization at the hands of police experienced by Black and Brown communities.

Combination antidote and synergistic opportunity, the IHA brought youth and elders together (in-person through March 13, 2020, and remotely since then). Youth and elders connected to a sense of camaraderie, shared purpose, inspiration in a time of profound isolation and loss. Together, they have been learning, sharing, planning and gradually producing the building blocks for an exhibit that aims to engage our region in action-oriented dialogue about racist housing policies of the 1930s-1970s and beyond. Youth and elders are understanding history as a tool for change. (i.e., one elder talks about how even though he now realizes his wonderful Clarissa St. neighborhood was created by redlining, which limited where African Americans (no matter their social class) could live, and was then destroyed by urban renewal, he had no idea until recently the systemic policies and practices that created both very intimate experiences.)

A major success is the ripple impact toward historic preservation for the Clarissa Street Corridor. The combination of this effort with the YHAs, which has put wind and inspiration into the elders' sails, and the pause that came with the pandemic (the 25th Reunion has been postponed now until August 2022), has made the CSRC reflect and decide to reconfigure itself to focus on legacy and preservation. They are working toward creating a 501-c3 organization to hopefully be led by a next generation descendent as Executive Director. The IHA project got the Clarissa St. Corridor selected for the catalytic [Landmark Society of Western NY's 2020 Five to Revive](#).

From Joan Coles Howard (Clarissa St. elder, entrepreneur, newspaper editor/publisher and daughter of Howard W. Coles) to the YHAs: "Thank YOU and the Teen Empowerment family for making me a part of it. I can't begin to tell you how much time spent with you teens has meant to me. My energy has been renewed because you all have shared your energy with me. I'm looking forward to our continued successes as we share our positivity about our people - and history - with others."

Just 3 weeks ago, we lost one of the elders, Mr. Howard Griffin, who is featured in the documentary and has been a member of our talkback team (elders and youth who take questions at the end of special screenings). **Amarah (YHA)** was crushed and shared, "All along we've been talking about how the elders need to pass the torch to us and that we need to carry on the legacy. But I hadn't really thought about the fact that they actually won't be here with us anymore." This reflection during our planning session that day brought even more meaning and resolve to this effort.

[See "IHA Phases 1-3 Accomplishments so far" for links to media stories, photos and more evaluative comments by youth and elders.](#)

⚙️ What did you learn from this project and what are your next steps?

Reorientation to a Phased Process: We must acknowledge that our Presbytery of the Genesee Valley grant proposal came due early on as we were developing our Intergenerational History Ambassadors Exhibit concept. While our vision remains intact and has even expanded with all of the opportunities and interest it has generated, we have been learning together through our collaborative process about the world of exhibition arts. This means that we underestimated the time and expense that exhibits take to put together.

We learned from RIT's City Art Space that they book at least a year out. From our exhibit advisor at the Rochester Museum and Science Center (RMSC), we learned more about how to estimate design and fabrication costs more accurately, including multiple variables and that square footage must be calculated based on the size of the space, not on the estimated square footage of the exhibit unit themselves. And, of course, COVID makes in-person exhibits inadvisable well into 2021—especially ones with the interactive nature that we are aiming for.

Our documentary is providing a centerpiece of the exhibit design process, which also involves more details and tasks than we had anticipated. Rochester Public Library and UR Public History advisors and a pro bono lawyer are guiding us through the intricacies of gaining proper legal permissions to copyright it and use images (as well for the Clarissa St. photo digitization/archival project). We are applying to film festivals. And university, high school and public television producers are advising us on how we properly value and market *Clarissa Uprooted* and the curriculum we are writing.

Our exhibit is now scheduled at RIT's City Art Space in the old Sibley building for May-July 2022. We truly hope Presbytery of the Genesee Valley will help us get there through the next phases.

Through intergenerational partnership, we will create a multi-media exhibit with permanent portable and digital elements that allow both the long-term preservation of community stories and the accessibility to a variety of audiences over time as pieces of the exhibit are made to travel. The exhibit will develop through dialogue and planning by a core group of Rochester youth, elders and multiple institutional partners.

Elements identified by youth and elders so far through the Intergenerational History Ambassadors (IHA) project include: Visitors to the IHA exhibit will immerse themselves in Clarissa Street's story through imagery, voices, music, club and old street sounds, video, and tactile interactions, such as flipping through reproduced news articles, walking through a tunnel of historic streetscapes projected along the walls, clicking interactive overlaying maps that compare 1930s-70s with contemporary geolocations and demographics, virtual reality, and more experiences the team will develop. Periodically on their walkthrough, visitors will have opportunities to connect their own knowledge or questions about why they or their families originally arrived in Rochester, including prompts regarding when/why they moved to the region, where/how they lived, whether they owned or rented, how diverse and connected their community was/is, whether they moved around and why, etc.

The IHA team will determine the visitor's flow through the exhibit based on the oral histories, archival research, and collaborative cross-referencing process that a future Presbytery grant would support. During Phase 4 we are gathering collateral and assets to choose from in preparation for Phase 5 implementation. Archival materials and other elements selected by youth and elders will tell the story of Rochester. A lot of work goes into this process as some come from families' personal collections and others from existing archives (current status appears in *italics*), including:

- **Digitized photos** integrating archival/social documentary still images of this thriving Black neighborhood around Clarissa St. in the former 3rd Ward (circa 1920s-1970s (pre- and post-urban renewal)) (*Conceptual display; photos and deeds of gift being acquired now*)
- **Clarissa Uprooted documentary of oral histories** and intergenerational exchange playing in a darkened, sound-isolated space with benches (*Complete, 25 min.*)
- **Spirit of the Pythodd online exhibit** kiosk with headphones to hear excerpts from youth-facilitated reminiscing session with elder jazz-cat Pythodd Club patrons (*Complete, online exhibit by University of Rochester Public History students and recorded Zoom session by YHAs and elders*)
- **Comparative news articles** juxtaposing the Gannett and Frederick Douglass Voice/The Voice newspapers (*Committed by D&C & RMSC; Digitizing and “clipping” related topics, Jan-April 2021*)
- **Photographic evidence of restrictive covenants** in local deeds (*Inventory/report completed, Yale study*)
- **Redlining-era/contemporary map and data juxtapositions** (*Comprehensive review/images completed, along with curriculum and teacher training, PathStone Foundation*)
- **Map and variety of Black-owned businesses on old Clarissa St.** (*Research and prototype complete, currently appearing in [exhibit](#) hanging through early 2021 at Rochester Public Library; Explore digitizing*)
- **Animations and Augmented Reality platforms** to recreate the visual landscape (*Conceptual, exploratory partnerships with RIT digital designers, elders and TE youth artists*)
- **Spoken word, vintage street-beat style poetry** by former Clarissa St. resident, bobby johnson (*sic.*), and youth performances connecting history to contemporary experiences, including styles of jazz and hip hop (*Collecting and writing ongoing*)
- **Digital interface and other interactive opportunities** for participants to reflect on how the exhibit connects to their own experience/community and imagine ways to repair our community’s future. (*Conceptual, will intersect with evaluation plan*)



Patrons at Pythodd Club on Clarissa Street, early 1960s
(University of Rochester archive)

We truly hope that the Presbytery is as excited about the evolving possibilities of this project and will support the next phase that has grown from this inspiring project that you helped make happen. We will need all the support we can find to make such a dynamic and wide-reaching project a reality and would love to apply for this year’s grant process when the cycle opens again.