OUTREACH FROM A DISTANCE

How Camden nonprofits keep youth engaged during pandemic

Phaedra Trethan Cherry Hill Courier-Post | USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

Love, Tawanda Green-Jones believes, can overcome anything. The founder and leader of Camden Sophisticated Sisters knows a lot about love: She's used her seemingly bottomless reservoir of it to help hundreds of kids over the years overcome poverty, trauma and other challenges through dancing, drumming, stepping, service and schooling. Her dance troupe has been featured on national television and has performed at a host of city and regional events. Its practices and performances offer Camden's young people a positive outlet for their creativity and boundless energy.

“That extra time is the devil's workshop,” she said.

But how can outreach groups like CSS continue that mission in the midst of a global pandemic, widespread shutdowns, canceled events and social distancing demands?

“This is new to everyone, and we're just trying to adjust to this new norm,” said Green-Jones, who often refers to her charges and alumni as “my babies,” no matter their age.

“But I want to be careful because I'm dealing with such precious cargo.”

Bruce Main, founder and president of Urban Promise, admitted his nonprofit has had to make a lot of adjustments and find new ways to keep its young people engaged.

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The East Camden-based nonprofit hosts a series of programs, including Christian elementary and high schools, summer camps and after-school programs, Street Leaders program for teens, Urban Trekkers and BoatWorks programs.

The schools transitioned, like all New Jersey schools, to a remote learning model once schools closed their buildings in mid-March, Main said, and Urban Promise worked to make new each of its students had laptops, and that they had internet access at home.

"We’ve been making it a lot of adjustments and creating things on the fly," he said. "It’s an interesting thing, everything keeps changing. There have been a lot of changes.

Through its Wellness Center, Urban Promise has been checking in with families, offering food and other assistance if it’s needed, Main said. They’ve hosted drive-through food distribution and if children need transportation to pick up provisions, they’ll bring it to them.

The Urban Trekkers program, which normally takes about 100 youngsters on outdoor excursions and canoe trips, has instead offered outdoor activities in kids’ front yards, "admitting" they’ve delivered "campfire" pizza kits and ice cream, "survival" kits that include water bottles and safety tips.

"We’ve really had to pivot, like everyone else has," said biosensor Weidner, director of Urban Promise’s Wellness Center.

An existing emphasis on relationship building and overall well-being was a long way toward facilitating that pivot, she said.

"Across the ministry, we realized what we’re doing...seems so dimensionally more helpful prepared us for COVID-19. It was just shifting some of the relationships we’ve been working on through online platforms like Zoom, bringing support sessions online and offering more inclusive in-person organizing in the city, parent support and in-person and online check-ins.

Some programs will gear back up, albeit in modified form, as New Jersey’s stay-at-home rules and warmer weather make outdoor activities easier, she added.

Urban Trekkers will offer outdoor river guide programs and socially distant canoeing expeditions locally; The Street Leaders program will host community clean-up efforts and food co-ops; the program will also continue with leadership training for young people with younger Urban Promise students to offer guidance and examples.

"We can’t run our summer programs the same physically," Weidner said.

"We’ve had to be creative with our programming and examples. It’s been a lot of just, "so what do we, what can we do virtually?"

When video of George Floyd’s death at the knee of a Minneapolis police officer and protests and civil unrest rocked the country, Urban Promise staffies knew they had to address the pain and alienation among its students live every day.

"We as a staff had been conversing with our families about what was going on, and we could pivot to talking, to listen to our students about how they feel about what’s happening, and how they react to it" Main said, adding, "We talk about how do we manage all their fears and anxieties." Weidner said.

Still, the emphasis on relationships is "a huge part of who we are," Main said. "So not having kids come to our campus has been a huge challenge. We’re concerned about summer, about having a lot of young people not occupied like they usually see with camps, sports and trips."

The switch to a more virtual world has been a blessing and a challenge for another nonprofit, Hopeworks Camden. Director Dan Rhoton said that while educating students for careers in technology, web design and development has been tougher to do remotely, it’s also helped open up more opportunities for internships and employment.

Hopeworks, which has an office in downtown Camden and employs graduates to provide web design, mapping and development services to a variety of clients, offers a revenue stream to support its mission. They worked with Comcast to get its students and employees internet access at home.

Rhoton and a small number of staff members continue to come into the 7,000-square-foot office. They help distribute food, offer an air-conditioned refuge during warm late spring days to students, and let graduates who’ve gone on to work for other companies a place to work remotely if their own homes lacked internet, or even just a quiet, distraction-free space.

"The awesome news is our young people are still delivering for our clients; we’ve launched three new websites, including a huge project for Tennessee American Water," Rhoton said.

Companies who’ve seen their workforce transition successfully to remote work, he believes, will also be more open to hiring outside their geographic areas — not only a boon to their efforts at greater diversity, but also a boost for workers in cities like Camden, who want to work in tech jobs but can’t afford to live in expensive tech-heavy areas.

The downside, Rhoton said, is that challenges many young people face have been exacerbated by the pandemic and shutdowns: family dysfunction, economic distress, domestic violence, to name a few.

He’s also found, such as parents and educators alike, that remote teaching is not the same as in-person instruction. "Training is going about a third slower than usual," he admitted. "We’re doing what we can, but I cannot wait until we can get this building back open. Young people learning this type of material, we know it’s better in person. We can look over their shoulder, help them when they get stuck right away. At home, they might walk away for a while, go watch some TV, go outside, whatever. They always come back, but not right away, and they lose that time."

Hopeworks has a group home, The

Crib, for students and alumni who need a place to stay and talk about their problems, who worked for a Camden hospital in medical coding, had to quarantine for a time after COVID-19 exposure. But, Rhoton said with a sigh of relief, "so far no one has tested positive."

Anais Melevedz, who works as a web developer lead at Hopeworks and is in a program atom, started his own marketing business and credits Hopeworks with helping him meet new challenges, especially during the pandemic.

"Developing myself professionally and networking, they’ve both great skills and I’ve been able to learn and it’s really sparked my creativity," the North Camden resident said.

"Working remotely shows me and everyone else what we’ve done so well, we’ve used technology to put myself out there as much as I can," said Calder "CJ" Pagan, a youth development intern with Hopeworks who lives at The Crib with about nine others. "We’ve been housed around between the city, Puerto Rico and Florida before returning to further his education.

The pandemic has presented a "huge learning curve," the 20-year-old said.

"Doing online and onscreen presents a lot of challenges for some people," he said. He’s helping him and newer students by keeping track of stall apps and websites and maintaining a checklist to stay on track.

Her and other Crib and Hopeworks residents concerned about COVID-19, but he said they’re staying positive and trying to enjoy group-oriented activities in a responsible way: movie nights and barbecues.

"There were moments of panic and anxiety I certainly was among," he said. "This scares me not only for my own family, but also for the family of my family who I exist. Still, overall Crib residents have a "joyful atmosphere."

Hopeworks has seen an 80 to 90 per cent participation rate in its programs, which include life skills and job readiness.

"We’re doing what it takes," Green-Jones of Camden Sophisticated Sisters said what’s important is making sure the young people she works with continue to feel connected. She’s grateful for Zoom so "I can see their faces," and it’s helpful for students managing their own parental obligations, as she’s helping her husband as he recovers from a stroke and even free time at home, she has actually helped her have "excitement.

"I had to take the bull by the horns, but the best thing about a storm is that it doesn’t last," she said.

"We’re not exempt from crisis. You have to stay positive. We just keep trying to let lots and families know that we are here for them, offer any assurances we can, ask them, ‘What can we do to help?”

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