Background and Context
Loíza is the poorest municipality in Puerto Rico\(^1\) and has been continuously hit by devastating hurricanes. In September 2022, Hurricane Fiona devastated the area, causing power outages and floods. People were left without homes, schools, and opportunities to thrive. Due to extreme poverty in Loíza, youth violence is common.

Though Loíza is known to have extreme poverty, some Puerto Ricans believe the issues of violence arise from the majority Black population (36.7\%)\(^2\). Racist perceptions of the residents of the city cause negative self-perceptions for Loíza youth which leads to further violence. According to the community coordinator for the Alliance for Peace in Puerto Rico, Alana Feldman Solar, Loíza has seen an increase in youth involved violence in the last decade.\(^3\) Multiple organizations, including the Obama Foundation (My Brother's Keeper, an organization to disrupt violence between boys and young men of color), the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and Taller Salud, have initiated or supported programs in Loíza to specifically address the issue of youth-involved violence.

Project Vision and Goals
Urban Art Beat (UAB), founded in the South Bronx in response to a string of youth-involved shootings, provides community-centered, meaningful, and intentional opportunities for youth to connect with their cultural roots, customs, and traditions. By connecting youth to their roots, UAB hopes to disrupt negative self perceptions of race and ethnic background, promoted by stereotyping and violence. Since 2007, UAB has worked diligently to serve the unique needs of young people around the globe—in schools, high-poverty neighborhoods, detention centers, and prisons—through arts workshops that implement Hip Hop pedagogy. The legacy of Hip Hop, founded in the South Bronx by youth experiencing violence, informs the work that we do. In 1971, after the killing of “Black Benjy,” a young peacemaker, rival gangs gathered in a high school gymnasium to sign a peace treaty, committing themselves to end community violence. This newfound peace enabled young people to make music and dance at parties together without violent interruption. Through Hip Hop music, dance, and culture, marginalized youth use their voices to see beyond imposed racial prejudices and social conflict.

Teaching the history and heritage of Hip Hop is necessary as it encourages pride and ownership to students' work as Black and Brown artists. At the beginning of our workshops, we engage students in a series of questions about the issues they face and how they want to see them change. After hearing the voices of the students, they choose what workshops they want to be a part of. This will be UAB’s 10th year organizing free summer camps for high-risk youth. Our goal is to serve 46 local youth from public schools at our camp, full with food, dance, art, music, self-defense workshops, and a final show. All of our programs work towards a culminating final project that provides structure and meaning for students. Over the course of the camp, we will host workshops such as Bomba y Plena dance, exploring Afro-Latino and Taino roots, song-writing skills, and lessons about the history of Loíza and Hip Hop. We believe that individualized attention to students is necessary to their learning, so we maintain a 5-to-1 student-teacher ratio in all of our programs. In the workshops, UAB mentors and trained community arts practitioners prepare youth for the final show, which encourages risk-taking, a growth mindset, and artistic strength. Multiple students have won scholarships from their work with UAB by participating in songwriting or slam poetry competitions at the annual College Board scholarship competition.

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\(^1\) https://datausa.io/profile/geo/loiza-municipio-pr
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfzNO91Qxq4&ab_channel=ObamaFoundation
Leadership Team and Partners

In 2020, I began working with UAB by curating art for a virtual event called “Stop Killing Us,” hosted by The Maroon Party for Liberation, a UAB partner organization. Since joining UAB, I have helped with programming and fundraising for their summer camps. Last summer, I led online poetry and drawing workshops for the students at Girls Prep Elementary in NYC. My work with UAB has defined my purpose as an artist and empowered me as a youth mentor. Leading youth in Loíza will continue me on a path of changemaking through arts education. With a background in art, dance, Critical Social Thought, and Spanish, I feel prepared to lead a variety of workshops and confident in my ability to communicate with students and fellow mentors.

This summer, we are combining forces with an experienced organizer on the ground in Loiza, Dylcia Noemi Pagán, a visionary Puerto Rican artist who is the producer and local consultant for the camp. She desires to promote peace in her city through a holistic art center, Casa Casica Yuisa\textsuperscript{4} and shares our passion for youth leadership. She envisions the center as a building block for community art engagement in Loiza that connects local artists to their African and Taíno roots. Offering this camp will help create her local arts center, designed to provide artistic opportunities that will ultimately counter a culture of violence. The founder of UAB, Rosa Knoepfel, has worked as a teacher in NYC public schools for nearly 20 years, demonstrating her commitment to youth and leadership development. UAB is registered with the New York Foundation for the Arts and has partnered with over 15 non-profit organizations in the past 17 years. Dylcia and Rosa were connected by the UAB artistic director, Spiritchild Fénix, who met Dyclia 20 years ago through community organizing in the South Bronx. Dylcia needs help with Casa Casica Yuisa but doesn’t have the funding to employ local contractors and artists to support the physical infrastructure of the building. With the support of the Davis Projects for Peace, I will be able to coordinate infrastructure support of the arts center. In 2020, I was a part of a team that helped refurbish a community center on a small farm in Wisconsin. I hired the lead contractor to help us rebuild a kitchen, tile floors, and install insulation. I also painted a few murals to hang around the farm.

Implementation and Timeline

In Spring 2022, Rosa went to Loíza for the first time to meet Dylcia. Together, they began to imagine what a summer camp would look like for Loíza’s youth. Since then, we have hosted weekly meetings with our NYC mentors—many of whom are Puerto Rican—and Dylcia to plan the camp’s workshops and the fundraising plans. In February of this year, three of our mentors are going to Loíza to meet Mayor Julia Nazario to discuss the plans for the camp and to begin training local artists, recruited by Dylcia, in our pedagogy. We plan to host the camp in a rental space that includes multiple large rooms and a kitchen. In July, we will go to Loíza to begin decorating and setting up the rental space so that we are ready to welcome students. During August, we will host camp.

Sustainability

As previously mentioned, we are teaching local artists and mentors in Hip Hop pedagogy so that the camp can impact the community long after we have left. By supporting the infrastructure of Casa Casica Yuisa, young people will have a place to develop themselves artistically with the mentorship of local artists under the guidance of Dylcia. During Dylcia’s time in prison, she organized a holistic health center that implemented art classes for healing, as well as led the 500-hour drug prevention program for Spanish-speaking inmates. Dylcia has the undeniable skills to organize peace, but with the help of UAB and the financial support of the Davis Foundation, she will be able to continue her legacy of providing safety, peace, and healing to her community through art.

\textsuperscript{4} \url{https://dylciapagan.weebly.com/dylcia-pagaacuten-foundation.html}