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The Lighthouse Resource Center's "Creative Commune": *Curating Community & Self-Confidence through Art*
Jamaica, New York

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<https://toluslbs.wixsite.com/thelighthouse>

Background:

I grew up surrounded by music blasting through fast cars and boomboxes, intricate graffiti sprayed on abandoned buildings, and dance routines recorded on my dead-end street. Art is central to my community and its community of youth in particular. Many of my peers create music as an outlet for pain and joy and I myself grew up reading and writing poetry. The arts are important for self-expression and self-development and form the foundation of a tradition of black expression and survival. They are, however, tragically and ironically neglected and underfunded in my community's public schools.

Jamaica, Queens, located in New York City, is where I call home. It is rich in culture but poor in economic and educational resources. It is home to 67% Black and 17% Latinx folks, of whom one out of six live in poverty and/or are unemployed while the majority are burdened with rent.¹ My community's lack of resources also manifests in the educational system, whose schools offer little diversity in arts classes. In a 2019 Department of Education Survey, only 19% of responding high schools citywide reported offering dance classes, 63% offered music classes, and 39% offered theatre.² This is little doubt that my community's schools are amongst the 81% that don't offer dance classes as well as the other invisible percentages. The High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety, just a few blocks away from my house, only offers Visual Arts Education and there is only one art teacher for a school of nearly 400 students.³ It is all that they can offer; District 28's per pupil allocation is below the city average and amongst the lowest in Queens.⁴ This also means that there is much undiscovered and undeveloped talent in my neighborhood. The summer, when school is out and many youths are unemployed, is a crucial time to target this problem. Some of the most fulfilling and stimulating growth can and often does occur outside of a classroom setting and I want to capitalize on that.

In response to this need, I have registered a nonprofit organization with New York State called The Lighthouse Resource Center. Its mission is to empower youth with the educational and creative resources to lead the community toward academic, professional, and personal success. It is modeled after my college's CARE (Civility, Access, Resources, Expression) Center, which provides students with a plethora of supportive services. I believe that a resource like the CARE Center would have a tremendous impact in my community, where resources are limited. Since I've had the opportunity to lead there, I've learned how it functions and am able to mold it to my community. The Lighthouse Resource Center will connect developing artists with one another while giving them the opportunity to share their own art and artistic skills with children, seniors, and particularly their peers. Artistic engagement has a positive community, academic, and personal impact.⁵ The University of Chicago Consortium School of Research supports studies that show "how arts education can play a role in the development of social-emotional competencies that enable young people to interact productively with others, build and express a healthy sense of self and community, and work effectively toward their goals."⁶ In the Lighthouse Resource Center, written, spoken, and visual dialogue amongst community members will transform problems into solutions, stimulate the development of deep and lifelong relationships, and make Jamaica feel more like home.

Project Details and Implementation:

In collaboration with the Rochdale Community Center, I will cultivate an artistic space for youth. The Rochdale Community Center is "a multi-faceted, multi-service center, serving the social, cultural, recreational and educational needs of the Rochdale Village community and its surrounding neighbors."⁷ It hosts consistent year-

¹ <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2015chp-qn12.pdf>

² https://infohub.nyced.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2018-2019_annual_arts_in_schools_report_accessible.pdf

³ https://www.nycenet.edu/Documents/ArtsReport/2018-19/ArtsReport_Q690.pdf

⁴ <https://ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/printnycbtn47.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.cac.ca.gov/resources/benefits.php>

⁶ <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/2019-05/Arts%20Education%20and%20Social-Emotional-June2019-Consortium%20and%20Ingenuity.pdf> (page 12)

⁷ <https://www.rochdalevillage.com/page/community-center>

long programming for young children and for seniors, but some of these programs are not free for the community and neglect teenagers and young adults. The Lighthouse Resource Center is filling a need for a healthy space with productive programs for youths.

The Lighthouse Resource Center's summer program, called "Creative Commune," will be run by a team of five young adults who demonstrate an artistic skill, good spirit, and a desire to give to the community. The team may consist of photographers, writers, painters, or musicians; each hire will contribute a unique skill to the space, differing from their co-workers. They will be hired in the Spring as fellows and will receive a week of facilitation training and team building before the Center opens. This training will prepare them to lead workshops and events in which they will share their skills. I already have experience training people to lead difficult conversations, to communicate effectively, and to curate a safe and inclusive learning environment as a student lead of the CARE Center.

A significant amount of funding will go towards compensating fellows for their labor so that none will need to choose between making money to survive and giving fully to their community. Additionally, since the Rochdale Community Center is long established in my hometown, they have agreed to aid in the marketing process, during which we will reach out to high schools, colleges, and people in the neighborhood to raise awareness of the team search and of the Resource Center's space and programming. The Lighthouse Resource Center will provide tools such as sewing machines, cameras, books, and laptops during the summer. These resources will be available during workshops in which we expose youths to various forms of artistic expression and new paths of thinking. These workshops fall under three program themes:

1. *Arting Afternoons*, in which we teach a creative skill such as sewing or screen printing.
2. *Roundtables*, where we invite guest speakers and career creatives to share their stories and work, discuss community issues, and brainstorm (and enact) solutions together.
3. *Open Mic Nights*, always preceded by a poetry workshop, will be held once a week for attendees to share music, spoken word, and creative work in a supportive community.

We also plan to host larger events and retreats, such as overnight camping, to push people out of their comfort zones, stimulate their creative juices, and strengthen community pride and camaraderie. The space will be open 3-4 days a week, including weekends, for at least 8 weeks over the summer. Attendees should RSVP for events ahead of time, but all programs will be open for walk-ins. Community members will also be able to schedule one-on-one mentoring appointments with fellows for guidance and constructive criticism on their work as needed. I hope to bring 15-25 people into the Resource Center each day and I, too, hope to independently lead writing workshops each week. The summer will end with the publication of a Community Creative Magazine, which will include summaries of the Center's programming, photos of the work people have completed in the space, testimonials, and creative pieces and poems. Many of these works will also be featured on our website. This will serve to further encourage and empower community members to pursue their passions and show them that there is a plethora of people with whom they can converse, share, and create.

Future Impact & Sustainability:

The short- and long-term goals for the Center are to empower youth to become leaders in their community and strengthen community bonds through art. In stimulating the collective creativity of residents in South Jamaica, we will increase community members' sense of self-confidence, self-worth, and self-agency. The Center will measure this impact by giving attendees a short survey at the end of events and workshops. I will also continually cultivate a warm and open environment with my team so that attendees are comfortable to freely share anecdotes on their experiences. The end of summer magazine will also serve to show the work and development that youths have produced and undergone through the Center's workshops and events. Fellows, too, will grow as leaders during the summer. I will schedule one-on-one meetings with them biweekly to vet their concerns, talk through their programs, and hear of their progress in becoming better leaders and developing their own craft. Additionally, they will have developed strong bonds with each other through co-facilitation and creative collaborations. By the end of the summer, they should feel comfortable and confident to lead in their classrooms, workspaces, and community hubs.

In maintaining this positive impact, The Lighthouse Resource Center hopes to hire two or three full-time fellows to be housed in the Rochdale Community Center and to begin a volunteer program for tutoring and mentoring services for community members. They will continue to share resources for the creative and academic success of Jamaica's residents. The Center will serve as an employment opportunity and career start up for some and an inspiration for many.