



WELCOME BACK SUMMER

2024 REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY

Dear friends,

Over the course of five years, summer break dramatically changed for thousands of children and their families in our area. When COVID struck, it seemed that the return to in-person school and work might never happen. But families and community-based programs rallied, developed new health and safety protocols, and summer programs emerged as exciting spaces to ignite curiosity, meet new friends and build foundational educational skills. These summer programs also provided adults with confidence that they could return to work knowing that their children were in a safe, nurturing environment. And hundreds of teen and young adult counselors had meaningful work experience they can put on their resumes.

United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania's Welcome Back Summer has shown what's possible when we focus resources in a coordinated, intentional way to provide greater opportunity for our children. Over the past five years, with the support of numerous funders and our donors, United Way was able to invest almost \$4.7 million to support community-based summer programs across our five-county footprint.

Now in 2025, with pandemic restrictions mercifully in the rear-view mirror, we are changing our approach to Welcome Back Summer. We will now fund at a smaller scale the priorities identified by our agency provider partners. We will continue to support them and the amazing work they do.

The future is never certain, but one thing is very clear: helping build this community of out-of-school-time providers has opened the door for so many children to thrive. And the experiences they've received through Welcome Back Summer will pay dividends the rest of their lives.

Thank you for making that possible.



Bobbie Watt Geer, Ph.D.
President & CEO
United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania



Bobbi Watt Geer, Ph.D.

SERVING THE FIVE-COUNTY AREA



Teen Camp Apple



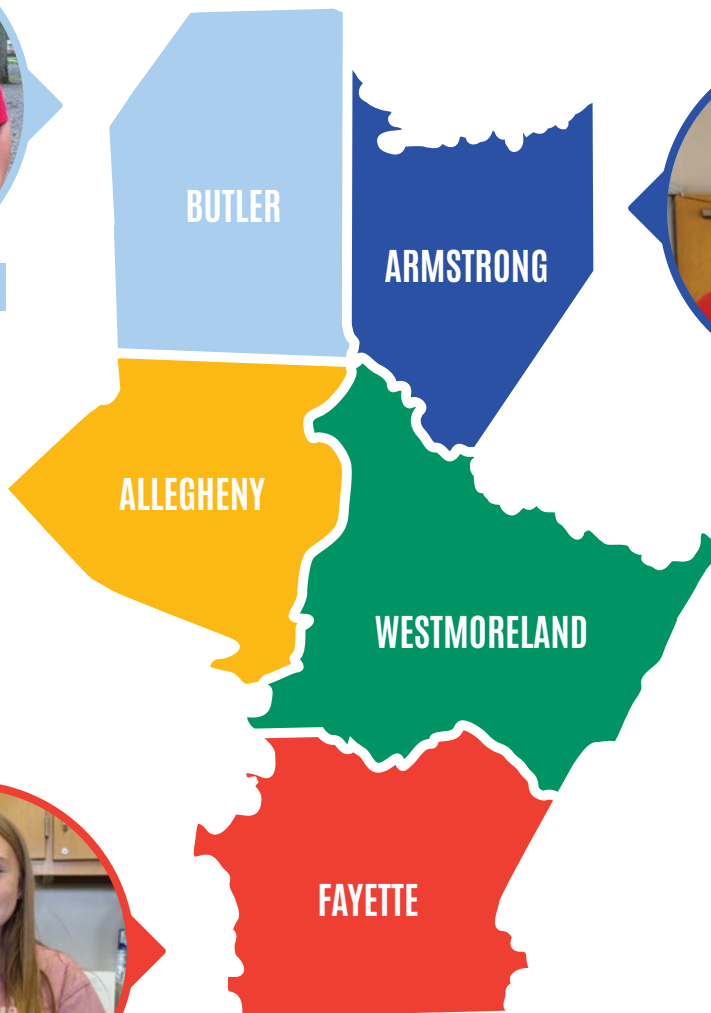
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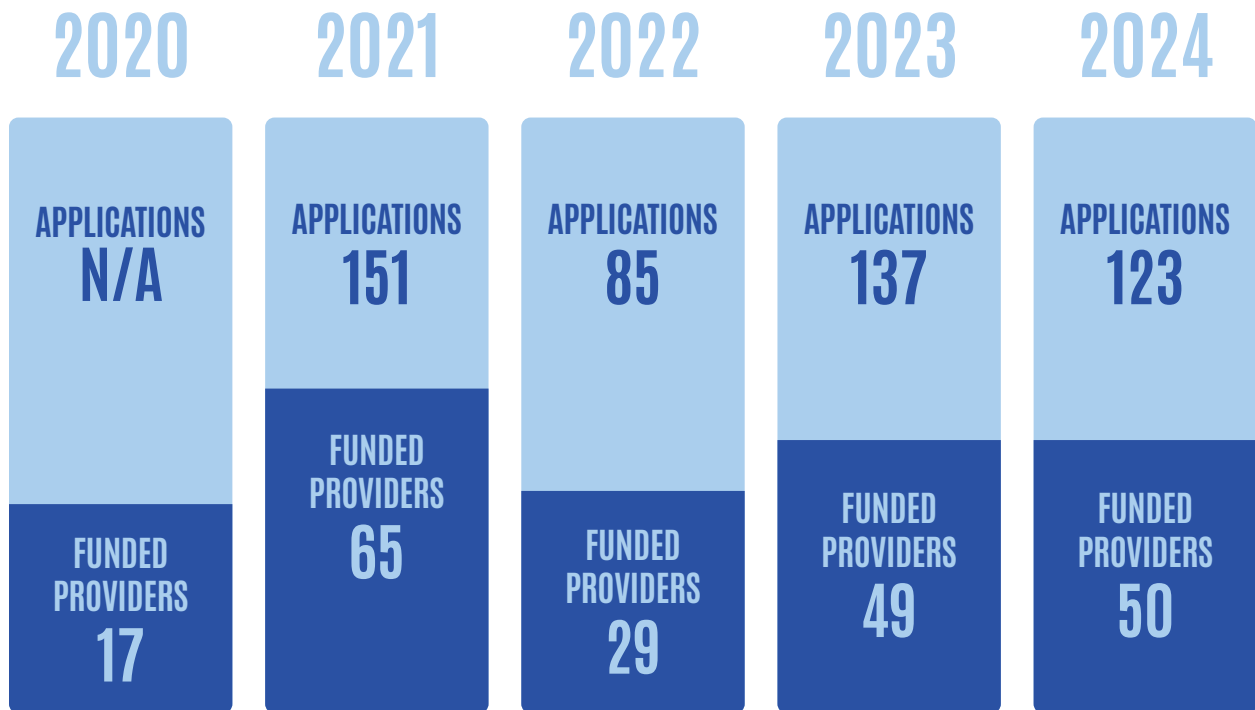


Sonward Youth Programs

UNMET NEEDS IN A TIME OF UNCERTAINTY

What eventually became Welcome Back Summer began in the early months of the COVID pandemic in the spring of 2020. United Way saw the need to curb learning loss that began that school year when in-person learning was suspended. Schools and summer youth programs scrambled to adapt their activities to serve much smaller numbers and make accommodations due to COVID restrictions.

By expanding our existing support for summer programming and identifying new partners serving communities where people work hard for low wages, United Way was able to help families with children find educationally enriching programs that would keep their children safe and on track through a summer of uncertainty.



CENTERING THE NEEDS OF FAMILIES

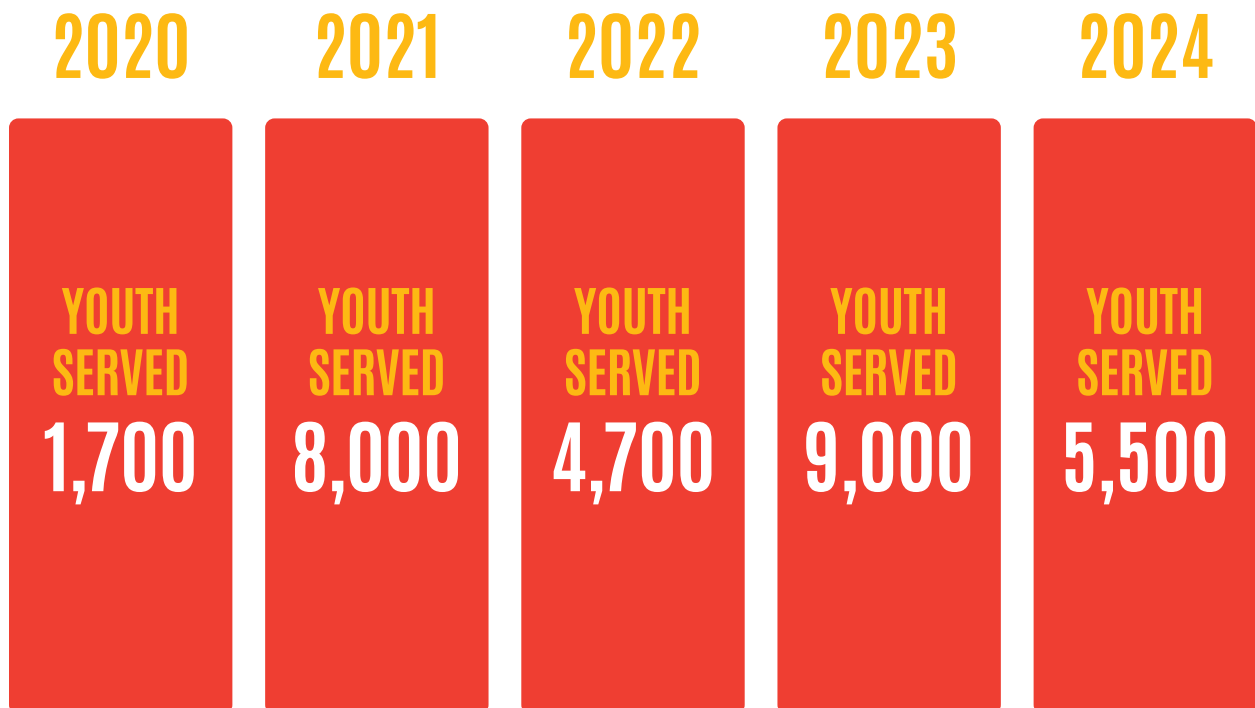
Certain childhood experiences stay with us well into adulthood, informing our individual identities and beliefs. Those experiences vary widely and often are dictated by geography and household income.

While classes and school-related activities form much of a child's schedule during the school year, the summer months can create uncertainty, especially for families led by adults who cannot afford to stop working while their kids are on break. But with fully funded and staffed programs, summer can be a time when kids thrive.

Regardless of neighborhood or background, all kids need safe places where they can have fun, discover new skills and grow into the people they are meant to

become. High-quality camps help kids build on and retain the knowledge they gain during the school year. Summer programs can also expose kids to a new world of wonder, personal expression and entrepreneurship.

In the past five years, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania has partnered with 103 nonprofits to elevate and expand their summer program offerings. Most of these partner agencies serve their communities year-round, but United Way funding helped them with the additional costs that summer programming brings, such as transportation needs, more staff, field trips, and meals and snacks.



PROVIDER PRE- AND POST-SUMMITS



United Way hosted two forums bringing together all parties vital to making Welcome Back Summer a success for the community. The first, in January, gave Welcome Back Summer-funded agencies the opportunity to network with other providers and share insights and best practices.

Staff reviewed outcomes from the previous summer and discussed overall goals for the group. Then in the spirit of summer, United Way organized fun, participatory activities to inspire bonding and innovative thinking.

The larger group broke down into smaller, more purpose-driven teams, providing an excellent opportunity for both new and established agencies to build relationships and establish formal and informal networks.

The second provider summit was held shortly after all summer programs conclude. This year, more than 50 agency leads and staff met on Aug. 27, 2024, at the Steamfitters Local 449 Technology Center in Harmony, Pennsylvania.

Kahlil Darden, Jr., founder and CEO of Young Black Motivated Kings & Queens (YBMKQ), has attended

several of these United Way summits. His organization offers students an array of summer programming, including STEAM and drone classes, computer coding, the Citizen Science Lab and African Dance Ensemble.

“Partnering with United Way allows YBMKQ to scale our impact, ensuring that we can provide the resources and opportunities necessary for young people to realize their full potential and contribute positively to their communities,” Darden says.

A natural networker, Darden appreciates that the summits offer collaboration and training in social and emotional learning and other skills. “Through these training sessions, we’ve built meaningful partnerships,” Darden continued. “We’ve partnered with Hope for Tomorrow to conduct group staff training sessions and regular check-ins. These connections increase our visibility and strengthen our impact on youth in Allegheny County.”

Darden says forums like these “enhance our ability to raise awareness about pressing issues like gun violence, disinvestment and lack of youth engagement, and amplifies our message of hope, safety and empowerment.”

THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUCCESS



Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an evidence-based approach to helping children be successful inside and outside the classroom. SEL helps children develop five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness and positive relationship skills.

Decades of research have shown that students who participate in SEL-enhanced programs demonstrate increased academic achievement, improved attendance and higher self-esteem. Children also report less anxiety and depression and fewer thoughts of self-harm.

Unstructured play time, which is often part of summer programs, provides an ideal opportunity for social and emotional growth. That's why this year, prior to the start of summer camps, United Way expanded SEL training for summer program providers by hosting three separate sessions for leadership and staff and facilitated by the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

The sessions, held in Allegheny, Butler and Westmoreland counties, focused on giving summer program staff the tools to provide physical and emotional safety for the kids and promote strong, supportive, connected relationships among campers and employees.

"The SEL workshops were one of the most beneficial aspects of our partnership with United Way," says Kim Louis, director of Sonward Youth Programs in New Kensington. "It confirmed some of the things we were doing instinctually, and helped get our whole staff to be more intentional on a daily basis."

MEETING DEMAND AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

IMAGINE FURTHER COLLECTIVE

In many ways, the pandemic laid bare the mental health crisis facing school-age children across the country. Young people lost access to formal and informal support systems that helped them get through their days.

It was during those stressful days in 2020 that Alexis Werner decided to launch what would become Imagine Further Collective with the goal of mitigating the effects of isolation on the mental health of young people in the Pittsburgh region.

Werner saw the opportunity to reach more children through various summer programs and schools throughout the city and launched the collective to provide mental health support and self-care skills to help children develop skills to navigate long, often unstructured days.

“During the summer, our focus is on building positive support systems, identifying healthy coping skills, nurturing the sense of resilience,” Werner says. “We’re looking to give students the tools to process trauma in their lives.”

They provide at least one counselor for every four children. Their staff-to-child ratio maxes out at 4:1, which allows for personal attention and the ability to make real connections. Each of the Imagine Further staff members goes through extensive training to identify children showing signs of trauma and other mental health warning signs.

This afternoon, they’ve taken over a program run by Homewood Children’s Village in a spacious classroom at Pittsburgh Faison school. Werner and her four-person team operate with K–5 clockwork precision to cover a lot of topics and activities in the 50 minutes they’re allotted. It never feels rushed, but every activity serves a purpose.

Today’s session starts like most with each of the 14 children taking a Polaroid selfie of themselves. Then one at a time, every child affixes their photo onto a large sheet with a web-like graphic to map how they feel today. They’ll revisit those feelings later.

As part of the next exercise, young learners sit cross-legged in a circle and take turns pantomiming their preferred coping mechanism that the group then tries to identify.

Dior, who’s going into fourth grade, is first to crawl her way to the center. She tucks her chin to her chest and presses her palms together above her crown of braids. “Meditation!” several of the children call out. The irony of the loud yelling isn’t lost on the staff, who chuckle to themselves.

Taking turns, other children follow suit. “I hug my pillow,” one boy says shyly. A few nods. One girl says, “I sit in the shower and listen to music.” That was not on the list of suggested skills, but it elicits a resounding positive response from Werner. “I love that! I do that, too.”

The session ends with a centering moment of calm. “Breathe in. Breathe out.”

Werner then surprises the campers by giving each of them a small container of Play-Doh. “Don’t get me in trouble by giving this to you,” she says. “When you get stressed, take this out. Pound it into your fingers. Squeeze it into a ball. Put all of your focus into making it as small as you can.”

United Way’s Welcome Back Summer provided funding for Imagine Further Collective to add trained staff and serve the mental health needs of children from age 6 to high school at programs at Homewood Children’s Village, Ozanam, and H.O.P.E. for Tomorrow (pictured opposite page).



LIFTING UP A QUALITY, AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE

THE LEARNING LAMP

The child care crisis facing our country does not take a summer vacation. For working parents of very young children, especially in rural communities of western Pennsylvania, the end-of-the-school-year scramble to find affordable, quality options ratchets up the stress level for parents and providers.

“For all intents and purposes, many of our families live in a child care desert,” says Kathy Morrell, development director for The Learning Lamp in Johnstown.

To address the needs of lower-income families with preschoolers, The Learning Lamp has expanded summer programs in New Florence and Connellsville to be a more robust extension of the school year, with an emphasis on continuous learning.

“We don’t think of this as a playday,” Morrell explained. “We have lesson plans all year long. In the summer we shift into physical activities that pair with those lesson plans, so the kids are more equipped going back or starting school in the fall.”

Thanks in part to United Way investments, The Learning Lamp has been able to make educational activities feel like playtime for younger kids. This year for example, just days before the start of the summer session, the Laurel Valley campus installed new climbing equipment and a listening center. Children can now enjoy audio books at their own pace, helping build confidence and reading comprehension.

This comes at a time when many child care providers are eliminating programs or shutting down all together.

“Child care is in crisis right now. Preschool and child care are severely underfunded. So that leaves most of the burden to pay on the parents,” Morrell says. “When costs rise, which they have, we have no other choice

A national trend hits closer to home for rural residents.

Child care was already in a state of crisis before 2020, but the pandemic pushed it into full freefall. Nationally, 63% of child care centers and 27% of home-based family child care locations closed in spring 2020.

Emergency funding from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) helped steady the child care industry in some areas, but rural communities continued to see facilities close for business regularly. High staff turnover due to poverty-level wages adds to the instability and scarcity of quality care.

In 2023, the Bipartisan Policy Center released a study showing that 35% of rural area residents experienced a child care gap, where the number of children who needed care far exceeded capacity. And families in rural areas were significantly more likely to drive over 10 miles to child care, considerably farther than their suburban and urban counterparts.

than to pass those costs on. United Way has really filled the gap in terms of supplies and facilities needed.”

Santana Fry, who oversees the day-to-day operation for The Learning Lamp in Laurel Valley, grew up and went to school in the area.

“As a mom, I know that child care out here is very limited,” Fry says. “This is a very hardworking area. It is a struggle for a lot of the people around here to find somewhere reputable to take their children. And I personally just feel so grateful to impact the community where I grew up.”



MAKING ENRICHMENT PROGRAMS ACCESSIBLE

LEGACY ARTS PROJECT

To walk through Legacy Arts Project on a midsummer morning is to experience a montage of human expression. Every room and available space is alive with attentive eyes, stretching limbs, rhythmic beats and ever-present adult voices coaxing young learners to stay engaged in the task at hand.

“Dancers, don’t look at our visitor! Keep your mind on shifting your weight on beat three.”

Situated on a duplex-lined Pittsburgh street flanked by two lots — one an urban garden, the other with an open-air yoga platform deck for campers — Legacy Arts Project is in its 20th year of celebrating and creating Africana art and focusing on healing, wellness and community involvement.

On an average summer day, around 50 kids walk through the door at Legacy Arts and into just about any arts or arts-related activity one can imagine. In addition to classes such as dance, videography and African drumming, students can choose a focus on gardening, culinary arts or wellness yoga, which today is being taught by Legacy Arts Executive Director Erin Perry.

“We really try to incorporate practical experiences into the artistic journey of young folks,” Perry says. Looking back on her 10 years at the summer program, she has seen campers turn into staff members who have then gone onto careers in the arts.

The immersive experience of Legacy Arts Project helps offset major cuts in arts education many school districts have made over the past decade. A recent study commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts shows that low-income students who are highly engaged in the arts are twice as likely to graduate college as their peers who have had no arts education.

“We fundamentally believe that people can be thriving artists, not starving artists,” Perry says, stressing that Legacy Arts “works to create pipelines and pathways and nurturing spaces for young people to have experiences on the creative artistic side, as well as on the administrative and business end.”

One former camper who is thriving on the administrative side is N’Rae, a high school junior hired to help with bookkeeping and project management. Director of Outreach Velva Perry couldn’t be happier with her new protégé. “N’Rae has really taken to these new responsibilities,” she says. “She might be managing this place someday.”

One of the highlights each summer is Dance Africa performed for family and friends at Pittsburgh’s New Hazlett Theater. This year’s theme is “A Tribute to the Elders.” Dance Africa showcases work from all aspects of the camp, from costume design and makeup to the food audience members will enjoy.



Knowledge of self is violence prevention.

“This drum is powerful, it heals,” drummer Fodé Moussa Camara tells young learners as he demonstrates the djembe, a West African drum used for ceremonies such as baby-naming, weddings and baptisms.

Originally from Guinea, Camara is a teaching artist who travels the world performing and working with young people to promote healing through music.

One of several guest artists brought in over the summer, Camara leads a workshop as part of the yearlong Drums Not Guns program, which is sponsored by Legacy Arts Project. The goal is to prevent violence through strengthening personal and cultural knowledge and identity.

“When young folks have a strong sense of who they are and their rich cultural history, it propels them into the future,” Legacy Arts Executive Director Erin Perry says. “They’re able to make sound decisions because they have a strong sense of their own self-worth. Knowledge of self is violence prevention.”

The ability to bring in a master musician such as Camara is important to Perry. “He brings this firsthand experience of his upbringing through music and shares that with the young people in our program,” she says. “It’s a privilege for me and the children.”

SKILLS-BASED LEARNING FOR YOUNG ENTREPRENEURS

THE CHILDREN OF SHE

The West Penn Recreation Center in the Polish Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh provides many of the usual facilities and activities one might expect. Teens play a three-on-three game of half-court basketball. The recently opened West Penn Swimming Pool gets sporadic use on a muggy July day.

Perhaps the most competitive activity can be found on the basement floor of this red brick facility, where three teams of budding entrepreneurs are workshopping their nascent business plans with mentors from the business community.

Bruce, 11, plans to spread his love of anime through a bright, character-driven line of urban fashion and accessories. The newly appointed CEO huddles with the chief financial and marketing officer of Gart Apparel to finalize a go-to-market strategy.

Bruce nods to his team, then whispers confidently to himself, "I have my opinion."

Now in its second year, the Entrepreneurial Summer Workshop camp serves boys ages 9 to 14 and is run by The Children of She, a nonprofit created to inspire and assist those in need of education, food, health and spiritual support.

Children of She Executive Director Jaineil Mattox sees the Entrepreneurial Summer camp as an innovative way to help level the playing field among young boys raised in the city and their suburban counterparts.

"I don't actually see too many alternatives in my community," Mattox says. "Without us, there would still be food insecurity and a lack of educational opportunities. But our program uniquely provides an outlet and safe, creative spaces for these kids to grow and learn."

Mattox observes that many of these middle school boys have been thrust into difficult situations at an early age. And while entrepreneurship speaks to grown-up aspirations, the program provides an environment of fun and encouragement. "It's so great to see these boys be young boys for a while," Mattox says.

Team mentor Sterling Griggs uses gamification techniques to teach principles of credit and profit motive to the campers. "I wish I had this program when I was young," Griggs says. "Being an entrepreneur creates future businesses, and it also makes us all smarter consumers."

Paid mentors such as Griggs work one-to-one with the kids and try to instill in them the belief that running a small business requires personal commitment as well as business know-how. After the camp ends in August, the program leaders follow up throughout the school year to check in on the progress students have made on honing their ideas.

Mattox reflects on what the summer camp means to her personally. "I guess it satisfies the little girl inside of me who is from a lower-income community and didn't necessarily have the opportunity to go to summer camps or to have positive educational workshops," Mattox says. "It makes me feel proud that we can be the change we want to see."

Support from United Way's Welcome Back Summer initiative enabled The Children of She to expand the Entrepreneurial Summer camp and serve more young people, building confidence and important skills to succeed in school and life. United Way funding also helped provide for nutritional needs during these critical summer months when school lunch programs aren't in operation.



INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO BUILDING CONFIDENCE

GREATER HOPE RESTORATION MINISTRIES

It's nearly 8:00 on a warm June evening, but 6-year-old Charlotte isn't showing signs of slowing down. She's the first volunteer to step to the front of the music production class, eager to share her name in American Sign Language with her 12 fellow students.

ASL is not a typical activity in a class on music production, but few things about Greater Hope Restoration Ministries can be described as typical.

Under the guidance of music instructors Candace Walker and Salim Graham, each of the children's sign-language motions are converted to tonal chords. Then, against a click track, each of the kids plunks out a melody on a keyboard using those samples.

The result is a two-bar music track as unique as the child who created it.

"When you can see yourself in the music, and your name is literally part of the creative process, it motivates you to see what else is possible," Walker says.

While many budget-strapped schools have been forced to ration or even eliminate traditional music classes, Greater Hope's summer program gives students access to complex concepts of music theory in fun, accessible ways.

Music is only one aspect of the curriculum. Over the course of six weeks, children will take part in video editing, podcasting, dance and even puppeteering classes.

Dr. Cheryl Jones-Ross, who founded Greater Hope Restoration Ministries in 2014, believes that there is power in introducing children to all forms of art and self-expression.

"We believe in helping our kids find a purpose," Jones-Ross says. "These kids don't know what their gifts are, or don't know what they're interested in, until they are introduced to them."

As a first-time recipient of a United Way grant, Jones-Ross was able to make the summer program accessible to more children. The timing couldn't have been more fortuitous. Earlier in the year, Greater Hope Restoration Ministries was able to find a new home at the Boys & Girls Club in Carnegie, which offers a variety of spaces to accommodate various classes.



✓ KICK ^{80 BPM} beats per minute 110 bpm.
✓ HAT
✓ SNARE See the best in me.
✓ METRONOME See wind can be
Mr. SALIM Extraordinary
MS. CANDACE Beautiful
Review! Inside and out
NEW SONG! See the best things
BEAT NEW SONG! See what you can do
A star in the making
People who love to be there!

10 5th grade 9th
6 1st George 10
8 2nd Noel 8 2nd
7 3rd Zaki 7 2nd
9 4th Jalen 8 2nd
10 5th Eryn 8 2nd
6 6th Cameron 9 4th

GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG WORKERS

SONWARD YOUTH PROGRAM

Dontavious Thornton looms large at Sonward Youth Programs in New Kensington.

The 15-year-old helps mentor first- and second-graders, mostly in the morning, during the eight-week program. He's often the first person a young learner sees when entering the brightly colored basement filled with craft tables and activities. As the child's grown-up signs them in, Dontavious folds his 6-foot-3 frame downward to meet the camper at eye level and offers a healthy snack to start the day.

"There's normally a group of the younger kids that fancy being with me," Dontavious says with a smile. "So I tend to hang out with them." This morning, one of the younger kids was feeling anxious so Dontavious sat with him in a darkened room chatting softly until the anxiety lifted.

As part of its mission, Sonward provides two levels of workforce development for students as early as fourth grade. While employment numbers have improved in many parts of Pennsylvania, employment in New Kensington declined nearly 7%.

"A lot of kids in our programs don't see parents going to work every day," says Kim Louis, founding director of Sonward. "Our goal is to narrow the wealth gap in our community. We want to raise expectations and instill values of personal responsibility and entrepreneurship."

After completing his mentoring duties in the morning, Dontavious shifts gears to take advantage of a new opportunity to learn skills and make some spending money. He teams up with other "yard ninjas" to beautify and provide landscaping for jobs that have been contracted through Sonward.

The yard ninjas' unofficial motto: "Be quick. Be fast. And nobody sees you."

"I love working with my hands," says Dontavious, who is gearing up for Valley High School Vocational Technical Training. "When I get to Vo-Tech this year, I'm going for carpentry or auto mechanics. They don't offer what I really want to do, which is landscape architecture.

"But my real dream is to build houses with my dad someday."

The yard ninja program pays well by area standards. By founding the program, Louis wants to raise expectations that her graduates should command a living wage when they enter the workforce.

With his salary, Dontavious pays for his football equipment and expenses out of his own pocket as well as for extra food for him and his brother. The rest he saves for the future.

"Football is a fun thing to do," Dontavious says. "But I'm trying to build a career."

Sonward Youth Programs recently concluded its second year with funding from a United Way grant. According to founder Kim Louis, United Way has "really challenged us to innovate and try new things." United Way provided all 14 Sonward staff members with social and emotional learning (SEL) training, which Louis described as "extremely inspiring" and said that it "empowered us to do better at our jobs."



Opportunities for teen workers have value.

Welcome Back Summer provided quality employment and job experience for 250 teens throughout the region in 2024.

Summer employment for teens and young adults not only puts money in their pockets but also provides valuable job skills and better prepares students for college.

During the summer, they learn the importance of showing up on time as well as work-appropriate appearance and conduct. Student workers also interact with agency leadership every day, adding to their professional network.

ADDRESSING NEEDS OF KIDS WITH DISABILITIES

EVOLVE COACHING

Like many of the programs in **Welcome Back Summer**, Evolve Coaching launched a summer program during COVID. “It was a real inflection point where a lot of needs came to light,” recalls Joe Farrell, co-founder and program director of Evolve Coaching. “And a lot of folks stepped up to meet those needs.”

Evolve Coaching supports the needs of neurodivergent individuals in our community through education, employment and the arts.

As Evolve Coaching’s summer program continued to adapt and evolve over the years, Farrell and his team kept talking about the ideal “Future Camp” they all envisioned. Finally, they decided the future was here, and the name stuck. Future Camp was born.

Operated on the campus of Winchester Thurston School in Shadyside, Future Camp offers two-week sessions that include classes in writing, filmmaking, visual and performing arts, animation and music. Many of the career artists brought in to teach and mentor the campers are neurodivergent learners themselves.

Farrell discusses the specific challenges summer months present for the students they serve. “Neurodivergent folks particularly rely and thrive on routine and consistency,” Farrell says. “For some kids, summer is the time to relax. But for our kids, that unstructured time can be very distressing.”

That isn’t to say the curriculum is rigid. Just the opposite. Every morning, campers can choose the discipline they want to explore and learn about that day.

In one wood-paneled room with plenty of natural light, three campers are sculpting various props that will be featured in an upcoming Future Camp film. Meanwhile in the writers’ room, last-minute revisions to the script are being hashed out.



A daily all-camp lunch-and-learn brings in working artists from Pittsburgh and beyond to discuss their careers. “There are so many jobs in the arts, more than anyone can imagine,” Farrell says. “Today may be the first time one of our campers has swung a hammer, but you know what? Maybe they’ll be building a set for Netflix in a few years.”

The curriculum and environment of Future Camp have been thoughtfully designed to be an affirming space for campers. “The world we live in is really built for the neurotypical mind,” Farrell says, “so we craft our spaces for the specific needs of neurodivergent folks, taking into account sensory sensitivities and the social anxiety that comes with meeting with new people.”

Leaders at Evolve Coaching describe it as a radical, person-centered approach. “Our goal is to help campers find their voices and gain skills both in the arts and beyond,” Farrell says.



Creating opportunity to grow and inspire others.

One of Future Camp's newest inclusion specialists is Alison Mahoney, brought on this year thanks to a grant from United Way. Alison plays two roles at Future Camp, toggling between project management and coaching accessibility for all the campers. She's enthusiastic about both of her responsibilities.

This afternoon, she's curating original sound cues created by campers in the digital music class. The cues will be used in an upcoming production. "Basically, my role is to do whatever is necessary to make sure that each department can stay focused on their specific tasks without having to worry about the logistics," Mahoney says. "I facilitate collaboration."

As a coach, she developed a lesson on accessibility for each of the departments at Future Camp. Lesson topics included physical accessibility such as ramps and handrails, and also the need for sensory accessibility and the importance of creating an inclusive environment for audience, performers and artists.

"I had a great discussion with the musicians about writing audio descriptions for their tracks and sound effects," Mahoney says. "It's important to own the intention of your art and the choices you made."

"It's part of the creative process to incorporate sensory access. It makes every artist stronger."

ENSURING ACCESS TO NUTRITION DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS

HERITAGE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Nearly 200,000 children in southwestern Pennsylvania receive free or reduced-price meals during the school year. So, when class is out for the summer, hunger is often in session. Studies show that children who do not have enough to eat demonstrate an acute decline in language and motor skills, which adds to summer learning loss.

As part of Welcome Back Summer, United Way provided grants to many agencies to supplement their ability to serve nutritious meals and snacks during the summer months.

One nonprofit that has seen a profound increase in summertime food insecurity is Heritage Community Initiatives (HCI) located in Braddock. This summer, HCI served more than 1,500 meals a day, the majority to children ages 3 through 8. "That's double what we do during the school year," says HCI Executive Director Paula McWilliams.

Scratch-made food prepared by HCI is made available to kids at several Welcome Back Summer programs throughout the Pittsburgh area.

But meals and snacks are not the only thing HCI serves up to children during the summer months. Their summer curriculum helps kids retain and grow their knowledge through literacy and STEM-based activities, as well as through programs that encourage social and emotional well-being.

But the highlight for many children and families is the meals, made from scratch and largely non-processed.

"The meals they provide for the children are nutritious and more importantly real food!" says a mother of two children in the program who preferred not to give her name. "These other child care centers give children these processed meals just to save some money."

McWilliams credits United Way with not only funding the food initiative but also collaborating to create a "well-designed logic model that I think could be replicated" in other communities.

Last year, United Way provided funding and logistical support to 79 nonprofits that help meet basic needs such as access to food. All of the 5,500 children who participated in Welcome Back Summer received meals and snacks.



WELCOME BACK SUMMER BY THE NUMBERS

Children served: **5,451**

Age

Pre-K and kindergarten	15.7%
Elementary	45.1%
Middle school	27.5%
High school	11.7%

Gender

Male	44.7%
Female	42.5%
Not reported	12.7%
Non-binary	.1%

Ethnicity

Black	37.1%
Asian	7.9%
Hispanic	4.9%
White	25.4%
Unknown/other ethnicity	19.6%

Teen Workers 247



\$4,745,000
RAISED



\$4,516,300
DISTRIBUTED



\$196,200
OUTREACH/MARKETING



\$32,300
ADMIN/TECHNICAL SUPPORT

A BOOST for Pennsylvania's children.

The future for quality outside-of-school programming in Pennsylvania received a welcome boost in July 2024. As part of the Pennsylvania state budget signed by Governor Josh Shapiro, \$11.5 million was committed to the Building Opportunity through Out-of-School Time (BOOST) program.

Through BOOST, the School Safety and Security Committee approved grants for programs

designed to reduce community violence by offering more after-school learning opportunities for youth.

State financial support of comprehensive outside-of-school programming is essential to the long-term viability of summer programs, which foster academic growth and promote social, emotional and physical well-being for working families at low or no cost.

PROGRAMS CREATE MEANINGFUL IMPACT

SURVEY SAYS!

In late summer, we surveyed program staff and adults whose children took part in Welcome Back Summer programs. Here are a few highlights.

"She came home from class and told me 'it's okay to fail. You can just try again.' Such a simple concept but something she really struggles with. This class helped give her the confidence to fail and keep trying."

"My son has special needs but is also high functioning. It's very hard to find him activities where he fits in. The camp provides opportunities in the community with peers that are age appropriate and fun for him."

"It's the best program in the town and my kids were so excited and never ever want to miss any days."

"A parent shared with me that the activities had opened dialogue at home, so that they are able to have conversations that they wouldn't have had otherwise."

"A kid came up to me and says they love coming here because they feel they are heard and it's a safe place."

"I helped a student learn how to write with a pencil so that they could start writing their name and completing activities with us in class. He is going into first grade. I helped him every academic day to hold the pencil correctly and trace lines and he smiled so big when he traced all the lines correctly."

"My son talks about attending next year's camp the moment this year's ends."

FINAL REPORT FROM PROVIDERS

United Way is continually learning from providers within our partner network. At the end of every Welcome Back Summer season, program providers complete a thorough report that counts not only the number of children served, resources used, and how much they spent on food, transportation and other supplies, but also collects success stories from their programs. Providers share stories of impact and best practices, which are then shared with the rest of the network.

This important step provides valuable learning and insights that go beyond the numbers, helping to inform future investments, challenge assumptions and give voice to those who are closest to the day-to-day needs of our community.

Here are a few of the impact stories from our Welcome Back Summer providers.

Discover Summer-Discover STEM, Citizen Science Lab

“United Way funding made it possible for 24 students from the Youth Enrichment Association in East Liberty to engage in interactive STEM learning without financial barriers.

The camp featured an exciting rotation of chemistry themes (including pH), edible chemistry, rocket science, polymer chemistry and the ever-popular science of slime. These interactive activities allowed children a chance to explore scientific concepts in a fun and engaging way, sparking curiosity and fostering a deeper understanding of chemistry. The opportunity to offer this program at no cost was a huge win for us, as it allowed us to extend our reach and inspire more young minds to explore STEM fields.”

PRYSE Academy, Alliance for Refugee Support

“A major project for students in the English conversation workshop was creating an ‘All About Me’ poster incorporating information about themselves, their home country, their relationship to Pittsburgh and what they liked about PRYSE Academy. This project helped students — including one very shy student from Ecuador — express their identities and connect with their new environment.

This project helped connect the student with a staff member who was also from Ecuador. The student opened up and shared his career aspirations and wish to help others, especially his family back home. The program helped him come out of his shell; when the workshop facilitator asked for volunteers to present their projects at the PRYSE Final Showcase, he was initially hesitant, but ultimately agreed. He presented his project with confidence and gratitude, thanking staff for their support, and expressed his hope to make everyone proud.”

Summer Adventure at the Sto-Rox Library

“This summer, our program made a significant difference for Jamal and his younger sister, Aisha, who had recently moved to the area. Their primary caregiver was their grandmother, who was juggling multiple jobs and struggling to find engaging, affordable activities for her grandchildren. Our program offered them a variety of enriching experiences, including space exploration and exciting field trips.

Jamal and Aisha not only enjoyed the creative and educational activities but also benefited from outings their family couldn't have otherwise afforded. This safe, stimulating environment helped them thrive this summer and allowed their grandmother to focus on her work with peace of mind, knowing her grandchildren were in good hands.”

Camp Challenge, Josh Gibson Foundation

“Each week, we took the kids on a field trip, but the last one really stood out. We visited the Josh Gibson mural at the Waterfront and watched a movie at the AMC theater. The bus ride was filled with laughter, singing and a contagious sense of joy. New friendships had blossomed, and the bond between campers and counselors was undeniable. The simple pleasure of watching a movie with their new friends was a first-time experience for many, and witnessing their excitement was incredibly rewarding.

One of the highlights was observing how much some of the younger campers had grown. At the start of the program, many needed guidance and reassurance. But by the end, they were confidently holding hands with their friends, no longer seeking the same level of support from the counselors.”

Summer Enrichment Program, Schenley Heights Community Development Program

“Tariq, a fifth-grade student, came to camp with social-emotional learning and development concerns. He did not want to engage with staff or campers. He cried, acted out and resisted every activity the first two weeks due to his uncertainty and lack of confidence in his academic and recreational skills. With a daily dose of math and literacy, along with exposing him to opportunities, new experiences through field trips, he began to grow and his behavior changed. He went from disgruntled to happy. In fact, he won the annual spelling bee, became proficient in his grade-level math and STEM activities. He even learned to swim and play soccer. His mother sent us a note: ‘The life skills he learned made a difference at home with his behavior and attitude. The food program was a great help.’”

EVOLUTION OF FUNDING

During the early weeks and months of the COVID pandemic, philanthropic and emergency public funding actively sought out new ways to address the humanitarian crisis and meet the basic needs of families. As the recognized convener across the region, United Way was uniquely positioned to mobilize our network of agencies providing summer programming to broaden their impact.

Thanks to generous funders, United Way was able to increase access for children and families to high-quality summer programs in their communities. Although largely born out of necessity, Welcome Back Summer's positive quantifiable outcomes persuaded many foundations to continue their financial support coming out of the pandemic.

One returning funder is McAuley Ministries, the grant-making foundation of Pittsburgh Mercy, a member of Trinity Health. Executive Director Marisol Valentin credits the pandemic with elevating the importance and potential impact of out-of-school programming.

"We're still dealing with a big learning loss," Valentin says. "Most of the support to address that loss happens in these spaces through play. Play might be the most important way to help with the educational gap, and it also provides emotional support for the kids."

"During the summer, all of these out-of-school-time programs need to go on steroids," Valentin says.

United Way tapped its philanthropic network to line up funding for Welcome Back Summer. Providers then applied through a streamlined request for proposal process. As with most investment decisions, United Way relies on volunteers and foundation leaders such as Valentin to evaluate requests and make specific funding recommendations.



"I see the transparency of the decision-making," Valentin says. "It gives me confidence in the programs, but more so it gives me confidence in the outcomes. The outcomes are amazing."

THE BUILDING BLOCKS FOR SUCCESS

United Way partner agencies make Welcome Back Summer come to life.

ACH Clear Pathways
Allegheny Youth Development (AYD)
Alliance for Refugee Youth Support and Education
Best of the Batch Foundation
Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh (BCAP)
Bible Center Church Inc
Butler County Family YMCA
Casa San Jose
CCAC Educational Foundation
Citizen Science Lab
Community Care Connections, Inc
Dragon's Den
East End United Community Center
Evolve Coaching
Ford City Public Library
FOR Sto-Rox Public Library
Glade Run Lutheran Services
Grow Pittsburgh
Helping All Victims in Need (HAVIN)
Helping Ourselves Produce Excellence
Heritage Community Initiatives
Imagine Further Collective, Inc.
Industrial Arts Workshop
Josh Gibson Foundation
Kids Innovation Playground (KIP)
Latino Community Center
Legacy Arts Project (LAP)
Melting Pot Ministries
Merakey Foundation
Mosaic Community Development Center
Mooncrest Neighborhood Programs / Hopebound Ministries
Open Field
Propel Schools Foundation
Schenley Heights Community Development Program
Sonward Youth Programs

South Hills Interfaith Movement (SHIM)
Spina Bifida Association of Western Pennsylvania
Steel City Rowing Club
The Children of She
The Learning Lamp
Uniontown Area YWCA
Voices Against Violence (VAV)
Waypoint Youth and Community Center, Inc
Will Allen Foundation
Young Black Motivated Kings and Queens (YBMKQ)
Youth Enrichment Association
Youth Opportunities Development
YWCA of Greater Pittsburgh

Welcome Back Summer was made possible by these generous funding partners.

Allegheny County Department of Human Services
Arconic Foundation
BNY Mellon
Buhl Foundation
Ciervo Foundation
Eden Hall Foundation
Grable Foundation
Heinz Foundation
Highmark
Hillman Foundation
Jefferson Regional Foundation
McAuley Ministries
McElhattan Foundation
The Pittsburgh Foundation
Pittsburgh Steelers



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