

Twenty-three year old Kai Roberts discovered his passion for music at an early age, participating as a youth in Carnegie Mellon University’s Arts Greenhouse project where he was able to hone his craft by learning the art of “making beats” and music production.

He went on to enroll at Carnegie Mellon as an undergraduate, but in his junior year he experienced a nervous breakdown. It was music that ultimately helped him recover and later to become an outspoken advocate for mental health issues on campuses around the country.

“I was very shy as a kid, and was not very assertive, nor was I good at meeting people. Art gave me the opportunity to speak to my side of the story,” said Mr. Roberts, who is now on staff with the Lighthouse Program, an after-school media arts initiative of the YMCA of Greater Pittsburgh. “[Art] gave me the opportunity to show my social side through another character, and I could speak my frustrations through my music.”

A plan is underway to provide more Pittsburgh youth with the opportunity to explore arts as a means of expression — and possibly a source for healing on some level — by converting the Homewood neighborhood YMCA, which oversees the Lighthouse Program, into a full-service Creative Youth Center. The first phase of the project, which opens to the public this fall, includes a performance café, commercial kitchen, full recording studio, two digital media labs and a 21st Century Learning Lab. Phases 2 and 3 are projected to be completed by 2019 and will include a number of additions such as an art lab, a computer lab and a black box theater, and redesigns of the building’s exterior and surrounding property. The total renovation cost is expected to be \$6.5 million.

The idea for the center evolved from the Endowments’ Transformative Arts Process (TAP), which began in December 2012 with a convening of 23 people from many different walks of life who were seeking to answer the question, “How can the arts be transformative in the lives of youth living in African American and distressed neighborhoods?”

Investigating this idea began with Endowments-funded trips to Boston, New York and California’s Bay Area. As part of the Bay Area visit in February 2013, 10 art practitioners from across Pittsburgh, including representatives from the Lighthouse Program, toured the East Bay Performing Arts Centre, the YMCA Berkeley Teen Center and the YMCA Youth Institute in Long Beach — all facilities with creative arts programs for youth.

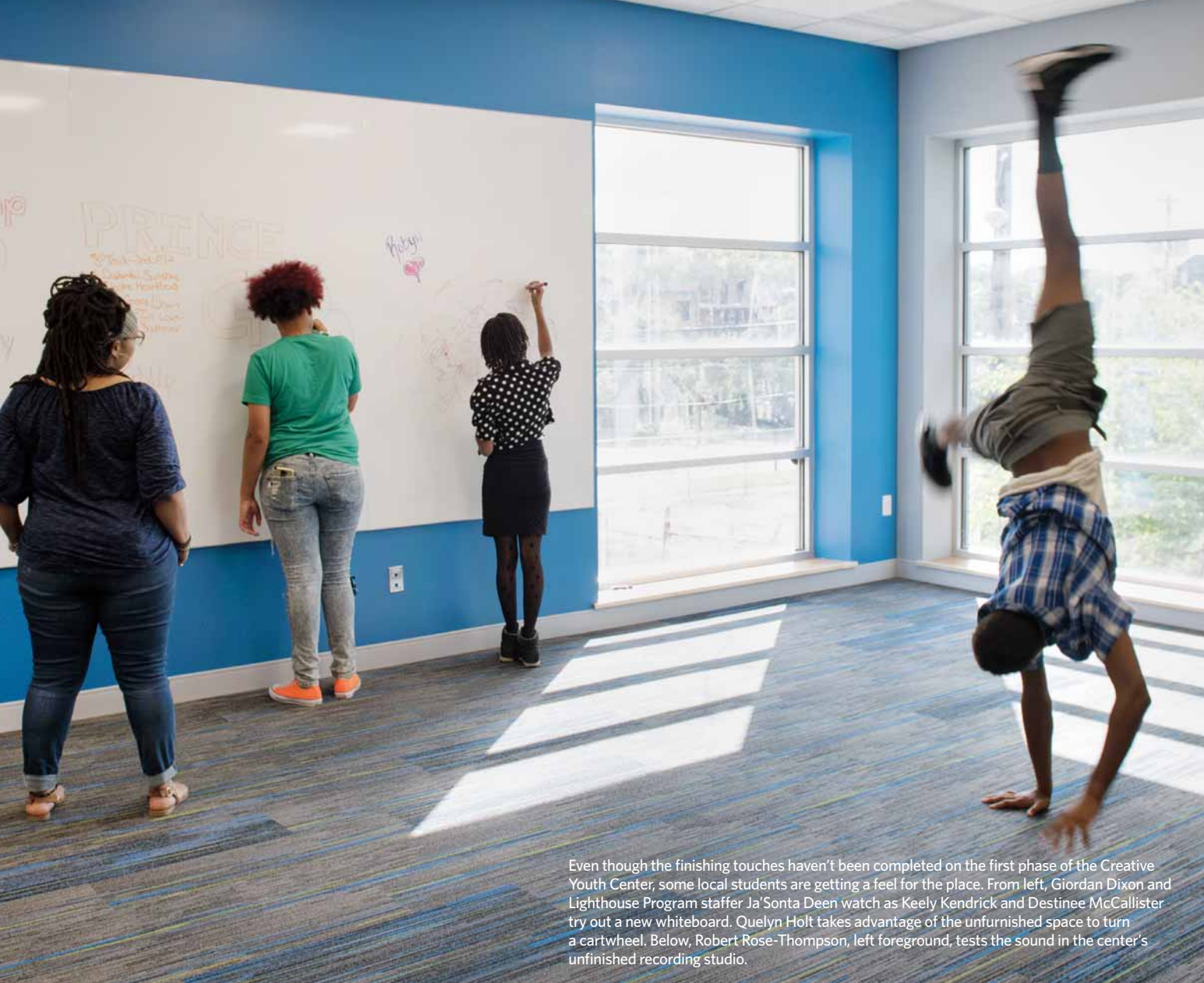
James Brown, program director for the Lighthouse Program, was part of that group. He had envisioned moving the program out of its current location, Pittsburgh-Westinghouse Academy 6–12, into its own dedicated space. “Being tenants in someone else’s building often created barriers to being a responsive program, making artistic spontaneity difficult,” he said.

The trip fueled Mr. Brown’s vision and etched his intent in stone. “I was blown away by the energy I witnessed in those spaces,” he said. “They were all jam-packed with students, lots of hustle and bustle. Performance and innovative creation was happening — transformation

THE ART OF EXPRESSION



A FORMER NEIGHBORHOOD YMCA'S TRANSFORMATION INTO PITTSBURGH'S NEW CREATIVE YOUTH CENTER MEANS CITY STUDENTS HAVE A DEDICATED SPACE TO EXPLORE THE ARTS AND EXPAND THEIR HORIZONS. BY RENEE ALDRICH



Even though the finishing touches haven't been completed on the first phase of the Creative Youth Center, some local students are getting a feel for the place. From left, Giordan Dixon and Lighthouse Program staffer Ja'Sonta Deen watch as Keely Kendrick and Destinee McCallister try out a new whiteboard. Quelyn Holt takes advantage of the unfurnished space to turn a cartwheel. Below, Robert Rose-Thompson, left foreground, tests the sound in the center's unfinished recording studio.

literally seemed to fill the air. All the things I knew we could do with our own space. It was like watching my dream play out right in front of my eyes.”

Mr. Brown made an appeal to the Endowments to establish a youth arts center in Pittsburgh similar to those he had seen. While there was interest from the foundation's board, he knew that he also had to get the buy-in of YMCA leadership. A year later, the Endowments funded a return trip to the Bay Area for him, his chief operating officer and two members of the Lighthouse staff so they could get their own view of Mr. Brown's vision.

“I couldn't just tell them what it would look like for our youth to have such a space to create,” he said. “They had to see for themselves.”

The result was a \$1.5 million dollar commitment from the Endowments to help transform the Homewood Y.

“TAP was our way of looking for answers about out-of-school-time arts and knowing we needed to find answers with those who actually would be doing the work once we started grantmaking,” explained Justin Laing, the foundation's senior Arts & Culture program officer. “That's why we convened that initial group, and the Creative Youth Center shows that idea coming to fruition.”

Mr. Laing added that he was doubtful that the project would have happened had the Endowments relied on traditional grantmaking processes, “which tend to either come through defined grants programs, our larger grantees or executive directors with whom we have established relationships.”

“This project represents a divergence from those tracks,” he said. “The Lighthouse Program was already making a tremendous impact in the community and had done its homework. There was already an established building, and the idea cut across more than just art.”

The renovations are expected to not only expand the artistic opportunity and capacity for talented students in a challenged neighborhood, but also promise even more transformative results—like those experienced by Kai Roberts.

“It is through the creation of art that young people experience that ‘aha’ moment,” said Mr. Brown, “when the art gives voice to their struggle and their story.” **h**