

Dinner hour is social hour at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA branch.

Every school day from 3:30 to 7:30 p.m., dozens of students pack into the newly renovated cafeteria on rolling schedules, claim spots at family-style or two-seater flat-top tables surrounding the room, and line up for hot meals. The time is an opportunity to catch up on homework, crack jokes with old friends, or make new ones by diving into one of the many conversation clusters around the room.

For Tyree Allie, an 18-year-old senior at Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy K–12, this routine is just one of the reasons the YMCA's Lighthouse Project has been fairly life-changing for him since he joined last year. He described himself at that time as being a friendly but somewhat distant acquaintance to many and true friend to a few. Other students might have known the 5-foot, 8-inch youth, with his dark glasses and easy grin, to see him around campus or in the neighborhood. But they regarded him superficially, like a stranger who was a footnote to the day rather than someone who was a real part of their lives.

"I was one of those guys that had friends but didn't do anything," Tyree acknowledged. "You would see me in the hallway and know who I [was] but I probably never would do anything with you."

Then a friend convinced him to visit the neighborhood YMCA to check out the Lighthouse Project. The program provides

hands-on instruction and guidance in creative disciplines such as music, filmmaking, visual arts and spoken word, and folds that arts training into a college preparatory component. Tyree began attending regularly, and his attitude and interactions with others started taking a turn for the better.

"For a while there I was a very closed-off and emotionally detached person. I didn't get really close with anyone who wasn't immediate family," he said. "To join this program with people I didn't know who they were, and to get to where I am with them today, was honestly astonishing."

Initially established in 2007 by the YMCA as a small satellite site at Westinghouse, Homewood's neighborhood high school, the Lighthouse Project was designed to serve as a safe space that gave students after-school supervision and a basic introduction to creative fields that aligned with their interests. By the 2010–11 school year, students in the program were demonstrating it was much more.

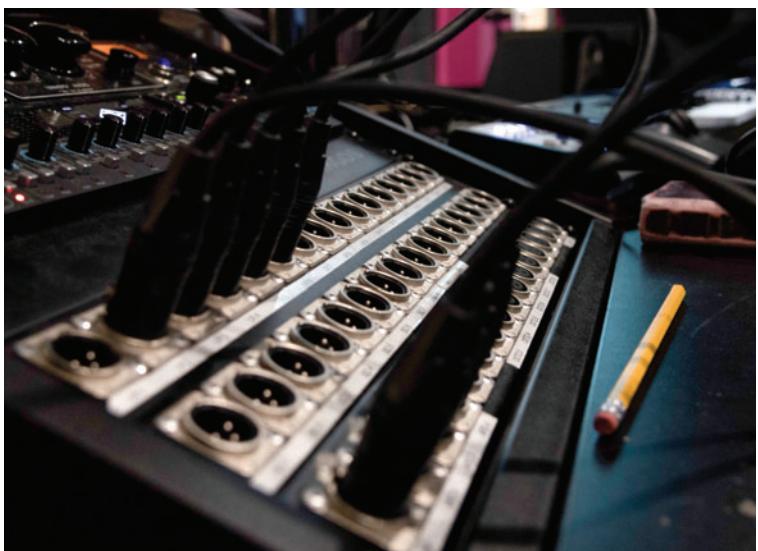
A study conducted by Pennsylvania State University researchers showed Lighthouse students had 10 percent better attendance than other Westinghouse students and grade point averages that were on average 0.7 percent higher. Graduation rates for Lighthouse students reached 87 percent, a stark contrast to Westinghouse's overall rate of 50 percent.

In 2013, seven students from the Lighthouse Project group Profound Myndz were tapped to perform their song "All In" during



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TYREE ALLIE



Clockwise from top left: Jahari Owens-Dixon, left, and Josh Karman, right, share a laugh while working in the Lighthouse computer lab. Tyree Allie, who is not in this year's summer program, takes a moment to gaze out a window before going back to a project he's working on independently during Open Lab time. Tyree practices in the Y's studio sound booth while Poogie Bell serves as production engineer. Giordan Dixon goes online to conduct research for the upcoming CD he's producing as part of the Lighthouse summer program. Brandon Hammond makes beats on a phone app as he works on his Lighthouse summer project. In music production, a patch bay, like this one, is used to connect the outputs of one piece of audio gear to the inputs of another.

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GRADUATION RATES FOR LIGHTHOUSE STUDENTS REACHED 87 PERCENT, A STARK CONTRAST TO WESTINGHOUSE'S OVERALL RATE OF 50 PERCENT.

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the YMCA Europe Festival before a crowd of 10,000 in Prague, Czech Republic. Partnerships with Steeltown Entertainment, Bridge to College, and Community College of Allegheny County have helped students get their first glimpses into the film production industry and taught them how to break into the business.

Also during the program's first 10 years, the Lighthouse Project caught the eye of Justin Laing, then a senior Arts & Culture program officer at the Heinz Endowments. Mr. Laing was in the process of developing a specific focus for the foundation on out-of-school arts programs for youth in African American and distressed communities. The Lighthouse Project and James Brown, the YMCA's youth and family program director, participated in the Endowments' exploration of quality out-of-school-time programming.

YMCA staff were particularly inspired by visits to nationally regarded youth programs such as YouthUprising and Youth Radio, both in Oakland, Calif., and a similar YMCA program, Youth Institute, in Long Beach. Those visits motivated Mr. Brown to pursue his vision of establishing a Creative Youth Center at the Homewood-Brushton YMCA that would house and expand Lighthouse programming. The Endowments supported the idea with a \$1.5 million dollar renovation grant, followed by a three-year, \$375,000 grant for operating support.

The Creative Youth Center now serves as a model for youth engagement that draws not only Westinghouse students but also those from 14 different schools throughout Pittsburgh's East End. It features professional recording studios; sound booths; state-of-the-art production equipment; and a live recording space packed with electric keyboards, guitars, a piano and drums. In the same wing as the sound booths and studios are a designated performance area and digital media labs. The downstairs kitchen was remodeled to be a functioning commercial food preparation space.

The expert-level equipment might appear to be a bonus, but the upgrades were necessary for the program to fulfill its workforce development aspirations in the most effective way, Mr. Brown explained.

Students were taking advantage of the chance to take music production and studio recording classes for college credit through the CCAC partnership, and some were making their way through apprenticeship programs. Giving them daily access to the tools they would use to build and maintain careers was the best possible way to reinforce the idea that they're more than capable of finding work and building careers in these industries.

"There are a lot of young people of color from the area who wouldn't have the opportunity to have access to that level of production equipment without this partnership," Mr. Brown said.

"The YMCA's Creative Youth Center brings together all the elements of a quality arts experience for youth," said Janet Sarbaugh, the Endowments' vice president for Creativity.

"James Brown crafted a program model that offers multiple entry points—which he calls 'casual, connected and committed'—that allow youth to enter into programs on a continuum, from casual participation all the way to workforce connections. The center is

still young, and I know that it is going to make a difference in lives of more and more youth in Pittsburgh as it continues to develop."

Tyree's main connection to music before Lighthouse was a talent for beat boxing he picked up after mimicking a scene in the movie "Men in Black II." The idea of producing music or doing an album would never have occurred to him on his own, he said. But after only a few weeks in the program, he ended up beat boxing in a performance for the program's final show last year.

Last summer, Tyree completed a music-focused entrepreneurship project through the eight-week youth program Startable Pittsburgh that involved creating and releasing a three-song EP under his new alias, Megatron. The Lighthouse partnership with CCAC also helped him add three college credits to his transcript through its music technology certificate program.

When Tyree returned to school following summer break, the guarded and withdrawn vibe he had carried so much of his life was left at the door. The change didn't go unnoticed in classes, said Westinghouse history teacher Sean Means.

"The work habits he developed through the Lighthouse Project—having to practice, working with his writing, meeting deadlines—have had an impact on his performance in the classroom," Mr. Means said. "Academically right now, he's inspired and competitive. He wants to get the best grade possible."

Tyree also stepped into the Lighthouse Project last fall brimming with pride because of his accomplishments and ready to share his enthusiasm with anyone who was receptive, which as it turned out, was a lot of people.

"[One day] he had to leave early, and everybody was really disappointed because he's one of those guys who brings that energy," Mr. Brown said. "They were like, 'Why you got to leave?' They really wanted him to stick around and work on a project."

This response didn't come as a complete surprise to Tyree, who calls his peers in the program—the students he once walked past without a second thought—his "dysfunctional family." The admiration is mutual, and he no longer hesitates to tell anyone he encounters how he feels.

"[Lighthouse Project]'s the only thing I do, that is my other family," he said. "Sometimes I'll loop it into casual conversations that this is what I do for fun. Ever since I opened up, a lot of people realized that I'm a lot more interesting than I seem." h