



True to her name, 13-year-old Lyric Murphy enjoys music and dancing, and explores a range of arts-related activities through the ACH Clear Pathways program, where students learn about theater, music, dance and visual arts from working artists.

To learn

to blossom

OUT-OF-SCHOOL-TIME
PROGRAMS MOTIVATE
HILL DISTRICT YOUTH
WITH ENCOURAGEMENT
AND OPPORTUNITIES.
BY LYNDA GUYDON TAYLOR

What can you say about a girl named Lyric Murphy who lives on Memory Lane? Her name and street hint of a Hollywood script, and in truth she has had some ups and downs.

About five years ago Lyric, now 13, sought her mother's permission to participate in an after-school program at a neighborhood center. Her father had just passed away, and she was hungry for things to do. A busy working mom, India Murphy was reluctant about allowing her daughter to attend but finally relented.

Since then, ACH Clear Pathways has become Lyric's second home.

"ACH is like family to me," said Lyric, smiling shyly as she peered through her glasses. "Whenever we get into a fight, we're able to work it out. We're able to handle it ourselves. We talk it out. Like, everyone can get along, and there's always something to do."

“We know that young people of color are afforded fewer opportunities to experience deep enrichment learning experiences than their white peers.”

Mac Howison Creative Learning program officer, The Heinz Endowments

ACH Clear Pathways is one of several out-of-school-time initiatives in the Hill District designed to support youth—particularly those from the neighborhood—in their growth and development. The program participates in the Hill Youth Partnership for Enrichment, or HYPE, a collaboration of organizations engaging 500 children and teens annually in grades K–12.

To more effectively serve Hill District families, these groups work together on matters such as coordinating transportation, ensuring a continuum of out-of-school experiences, participating in professional development, and providing financial scholarships. Other HYPE providers are Higher Achievement; School 2 Career; Thelma Lovette YMCA–Miller Afterschool Program in partnership with the Neighborhood Learning Alliance; YMCA School Age Child Care; Schenley Heights Community Development Program—A-STEP (After School Tutorial and Enrichment Program); and the Center that CARES.

Tyian Battle, ACH Clear Pathways founder and executive director, created her program to honor her son Amon C. Harris, who died at 7 of a congenital heart disease. He loved singing and dancing, so in 2010 she started the program because she realized that arts education outside of school can be expensive.

“I don’t know how to sing or dance,” acknowledged Ms. Battle, whose background is business administration. “I can’t even color inside the lines, so that’s why I get professional artists to handle the program.”

The working artists teach theater, music, dance and visual arts. Up to 60 children participate on weekdays from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. at Pittsburgh Weil K-8 Elementary School in the Hill District. Students are divided into three age groups, which are identified by a name: Smile is for ages 5 to 7, Dream for ages 8 to 10 and Expression for ages 11 to 13.

“I like to do everything. Dancing is probably my favorite thing,” said Lyric, who is a seventh-grader at St. Benedict the Moor School in the Hill. Last year, Lyric’s mother, whose love of songwriting influenced her daughter’s name, took students to a music studio where they recorded two songs. But as talented as she is, Lyric remains uncertain about a career.

“I want to see what’s out there first before making any choices,” she said.

Artist Eric Duffy, a program assistant, described Lyric as creative, introverted, humble, a really good writer, a leader and good at transitioning from one situation to another.

Those qualities were evident one evening this fall when Lyric was talking in the Weil cafeteria as the room throbbed with activity. A younger student hovered nearby, hanging on her every word. Lyric’s innate connection to younger students and the ability to lead that it implies has impressed Mr. Duffy. He’s encouraging her to become a student counselor when she ages out of the program next year.

Ms. Battle agreed that Lyric has matured and understands Clear Pathways’ mission. The young teen is willing to participate in programs and inspires creativity in younger students, Ms. Battle said. That shows the makings of a counselor for Creative Camp, a summer program during which children create mosaics that are installed throughout the Hill, with past colorful portraits that include a Stevie Wonder mural.

Ms. Murphy praised the impact Clear Pathways has made on Lyric: “It’s helped her with leadership skills, following through on projects, behavior and time management.”

Clear Pathways’ engagement of young people in the arts is impressive, said Mac Howison, Creative Learning program officer for The Heinz Endowments, which has recently given the organization a two-year, \$150,000 grant and has been a funder since 2013.

For an out-of-school-time program, Clear Pathways works with a relatively large number of children, and it is an

important out-of-school-time provider in the Hill offering a variety of support programs and catering to a wide age range, he said. He also commended the organization for giving older students the opportunity to become leaders and encouraging family and community participation.

While the Endowments awards grants directly to some out-of-school-time programs in the Hill District and elsewhere in the Pittsburgh region, the foundation also has joined other local funders in supporting APOST—Allegheny Partners for Out-of-School-Time—an initiative of the United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania that works to strengthen after-school programs by providing them with high-quality academic and enrichment learning, professional development, and training opportunities. One of APOST’s initiatives is HYPE, which APOST started in the Hill to foster cooperation among the neighborhood’s youth programs, especially in terms of transportation.

“We know that young people of color are afforded fewer opportunities to experience deep enrichment learning experiences than their white peers,” Mr. Howison said. “One of APOST’s core values is justice, which it defines as ‘addressing institutional racism and confronting structural barriers to success for youth and families as critical steps to ensuring equitable access to high-quality, out-of-school-time programs.’”

Sydnee Patterson Thomas is a student who has benefited from participating in programming developed by HYPE member Higher Achievement, an academic youth-mentoring organization.

Started more than four decades ago in Washington, D.C., Higher Achievement came to Pittsburgh in 2012. The multi-city organization provides math and literacy academic support and homework assistance, and fosters leadership and civic-mindedness. In Pittsburgh, the program

Noah Purdy



The Higher Achievement program provides students like Sydnee Patterson Thomas, right, and Juilanna Page-Daughtry, center, with creative and stimulating academic support, such as this journal-writing exercise on as theme “Never give up!” The girls’ stories of perseverance prompted laughter when they shared them with each other.

is housed in the Hill's Jeron X. Grayson Community Center, where it refers to participants as "scholars," and offers weekday and summer programming that targets middle school students.

Seated on a leather sofa in her Hill District home, Sydnee recalled her difficult adjustment from elementary to middle school. Near the end of fourth grade at Liberty Elementary, she learned of Higher Achievement.

"I didn't know what it was. It seemed like an interesting program based on what I was reading," Sydnee said. "They try to get us ready for the next year."

Her mother, Lakisha Patterson, urged her to enroll in the program, which both Sydnee and Ms. Patterson believe helped her transition to middle school academically—and socially.

"I'm an outspoken person," the precocious 12-year-old acknowledged. But her behavior sometimes put her at odds with teachers and students.

"In sixth grade, she was bullied because of her size," Ms. Patterson said. At nearly 5 feet, 5 inches, Sydnee is somewhat tall for her age and bigger than her classmates. "She just wanted to fit in. She was doing what she needed to do to fit in."

Both Sydnee and her mother said Sean Farr, former Higher Achievement director, was an important guide in this area. He knew what she was going through and how to mentor her. He helped her realize that defiance worked against her.

"Sydnee is very bright. She has the ability to lead," said Mr. Farr, now a positive climate and community coach at Propel School, Hazelwood. "We worked on how to lead and how to be respectful to others."

He also credited Higher Achievement with helping Sydnee and other students learn how to network and exposing them to colleges as well as helping them achieve academically and socially in middle school.

While Lyric and Sydnee participate in their after-school programs, HYPE is partnering with the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Hill Education Council to share information about what is happening in the Hill District. This enables the collaborative to serve the community in the best ways possible as it supports its member organizations, said HYPE coordinator Ashley Comans.

Ms. Comans helps facilitate the different transportation, programming and other connections for member groups, including ACH Clear Pathways and Higher

Achievement. She also oversees the initiative's scholarship program, which gives awards ranging from \$200 to \$2,000.

"I tell everyone this is the best job I've ever had," she said, "because of what we do for the kids." **h**



Photo courtesy of APOST

After-school programs in the Hill District that collaborate as part of the HYPE—Hill Youth Partnership for Enrichment—network participate in joint events that highlight what students have learned over the year through a shared enrichment activity. For this HYPE Showcase event, the shared activities on display included drumming and dancing.