

Perspectives on Building Trust, Safety and Creative Family from the 2021 Accelerator Awardees

the lewis prize for music

community | collaboration | leadership



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Accelerator Awardees Essay Series Introduction The Lewis Prize for Music launched in 2017 with a mission to partner with transformative leaders who create positive change in their communities by investing in young people through music.

de at The Lewis Prize for Music believe young people with access to Creative Youth Development music learning, performance, and creation opportunities, will grow into flourishing community members. Through a national prize process granting cycle, we identified the second cohort of Accelerator Awardees, whose organizations underscore the potential for young people to utilize Creative Youth Development as a vehicle to address inequitable systems that have unjustly marginalized their communities.





The 2021 Accelerator Awardees are Celina Miranda from Hyde Square Task Force (Boston, Massachusetts), DeLashea Strawder from Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit (Detroit, Michigan), Matthew Kerr and Christopher Thornton from Beyond the Bars (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania), and Susan Colangelo from Saint Louis Story Stitchers Artists Collective (Saint Louis, Missouri). Each of the Accelerator Awardees received \$500,000 from The Lewis Prize for Music to uplift systems change efforts at their respective organizations. These organizations emerged across the United States as standouts for their work in providing creative spaces for young people to lead in imagining, cultivating, and transforming their life paths. Following the Accelerator Award recognition, The Lewis Prize for Music invited leaders to share with a national audience the ways their organizations have emerged as vital spaces for belonging, centering the leadership values, practices, and strategies that have led youth to thrive. In the essay series presented, Accelerator Awardees have highlighted the importance of homecoming, reflecting on the ways their organizations have risen to the immense challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to the gaps they have already strived to fill in response to systemic inequities.

Inspired by the theories of homemaking and third spaces from sociologist Avtar Brah, who pioneered the academic work of diasporic studies, The Lewis Prize for Music welcomes the reader to examine the variety of ways that Creative Youth Development organizations recreate the concept of home. By

outlining their organization's approaches of being with and for young people, particularly at the nexus of community care and artistic development, these leaders push our collective thinking forward towards imagining new realities of homecoming in these extraordinary times. We hope these essays call for increased visibility and support for the ways Creative Youth Development programs serve as home bases of creative inquiry and positive youth development, galvanizing young people to lead us all towards more artful and just futures.

Susan Colangelo

Come Home

aint Louis Story Stitchers Artists Collective is a nationally recognized award-winning non-profit organization known for high quality art and innovative gun violence prevention programs through creative youth development. The organization brings together professional artists and black youth ages 16-24 to create systemic social change. Story Stitchers is

committed to placing youth at the center of the work both in identifying topics for exploration as well as the methods for engagement. This approach builds a community of youth and adult artists who respect one another. Stitchers collect stories, reframe and retell them through music and art to promote understanding, civic pride, intergenerational relationships and literacy.



Come home to a safe space. Come home to protection. Come home to unconditional love.

Projects create a platform for community engagement through an artistic lens and with it the Saint Louis Story Stitchers work to shift perceptions and realities and bring hope to the Saint Louis community.

My name is Susan Colangelo, the founding president and volunteer executive director of Saint Louis Story Stitchers. I am a social justice artist who has focused my work on issues around equity and diversity in race, gender, and education since 1995. My work has involved collaborating with other artists and scholars of various cultures and races. In 2013 I was embroidering stories from the local newspaper including a story about two sisters who were shot in University City. One sister died and shortly afterwards two brothers were arrested for the crime. After reflecting on the power of stitching throughout history; of the Aids Memorial quilt and quilts used to show the path of safe passage on the Underground Railroad, I invited other artists to

join together to create change. In August 2013 eight artists gathered in Old North St. Louis and founded the Saint Louis Story Stitchers Artists Collective — to make change. I am deeply inspired by the leadership and vision of the artists and young people that constitute this collective. Story Stitchers is deeply embedded in the local black community. Over time the young people at Story Stitchers have taken center stage and are driving the organization forward. Due to the enormous investment of our youth, Saint Louis Story Stitchers received The Lewis Prize for Music's 2021 Accelerator Award. The mission of The Lewis Prize For Music is to partner with leaders who create positive change by investing in young people and their music. We invite you to explore the work and the safe spaces of our stages and studios through the voices and words of youth artists through excerpts from lyrics and a StitchCast Studio podcast.

Branden:

I think of a safe space, where I don't have to worry about being judged. Home is a warm place, a place where I can find loved ones or people I care deeply about. People I can confide in and who have my best interests in mind. They want to see me succeed as badly as I want to see them succeed. People that I am happy to make sacrifices for. Story Stitchers feels like home because Story Stitchers feels like family.

Chris:

Story Stitchers and home? One and the same!" Story Stitchers nurtures our best selves just as home does. Most of the youth who start off are lost, troubled or hurting and Story Stitchers helps ease those problems and guides them through a process of self confidence building. Without Story Stitchers...without home, where would we be?

She'Kinah:

What Story Stitchers is targeting is the communities. They're helping and trying to prevent gun violence. Our people are tired of people dying. We're tired of the division. Story Stitchers is branching out. We're not just sticking to one particular neighborhood. We're always trying to find different people that can join us, partnering up with a lot of organizations. We're trying to do this all together.

Wade Reprise

Branden

We wanna change and we wanna grow. You in the way? That mean you got to go. They filling graves with the people I know. They fill my brain with these demons. I know. This happening way too frequent. I know. Say that we equal but treat us uneven and all of my people make me want to go.

Know when we say that we matter, it doesn't mean no one else matters. Know that we matter.

Know when the bar is too high, we the type that will go get the ladder. And if we fall off we'll come back and we'll try again after, if we can move forward with this. You for or against? Rise and we shine

Chorus

She'Kinah

We never falling down we never falling down Never never, we never falling down. Never

Emeara

I hold my city in my heart, When you realize just who you are, You realize what's truly yours And they can never take it from

Since systematic oppression, Trying to blur the vision But I will never let my people, Be define by restrictions

You see the crime rate is shifting And Corona been vicious But I'm determined to turn the tables Despite my position

Story Stitchers places youth leadership at the center of the work—in identifying topics for exploration as well as methods for engagement. We offer arts spaces for youth where learning in music, recording, and performing arts are a daily practice. We work through creative youth development and nonviolent collective action to drive systems change towards this vision.

AnnaLise:

What makes it a change is that it's young people mostly running it. We make up the topics and we make up our own decisions about how it's supposed to go. Story Stitchers is changing the future because it's changing our generation and creating a safe space for us to express ourselves openly about the trauma and the things that we experience on a daily basis. That's what I'm doing that's really impacting everyone— I'm letting my voice be heard.

Story Stitchers work towards systems change by advocating for racial justice and providing opportunities for economic advancement including creating a space for the collection, amplification, and preservation of black voices and music. Economic opportunities are made available through the hiring of black artists and youth, making space for artists to be paid to create new works. Story Stitchers address healthcare and education inequalities with mentors, friends and safe spaces to gather (including a music recording booth and instruments). Justice system inequities are challenged by welcoming justice-involved youth and through our work on violence prevention with the City of St. Louis' Department of Public Safety, which supports practices such as offering youth stipends, mentoring, safe spaces, and skill development to help young people steer clear of justice involvement. Civic systems for equality in education and employment are challenged by free performing arts education, offered as workforce training by black artists for youth, with all financially compensated.

In 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic, St. Louis City experienced a wave of homicides unlike any in decades, the highest rate in 50 years. Under-resourced and underrepresented communities were most affected. Our Big Idea—peace brought about by the voices of the young—is still here, still relevant.

Shawn:

It's getting young people in our communities involved and making sure they feel empowered to make a difference. Story Stitchers, it's bigger than St. Louis. I think Story Stitchers should be global. That's how much of an impact it made on our lives.

As young people are given greater access to programs through the new center— and to the mentors, friends, and music under its roof, more young people will be able to successfully transition into adulthood. We see a city where the St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department will credit the new youth arts and technology center, and the young people who bring it to life, with a new era of peace. As the Story Stitchers' revolution song expresses, "We ready for the violence to stop!" "We" is inclusive and brought about by the strong and impactful voices of the young.

Come home to joy.
Come home to respect.
Come home to music, art and creativity.
Leave home to give and to share.

Leave nome to give and to shar

Emeara:

I believe that Story Stitchers is one of the gateways to seeing change. I'm really trying to be that change. Trying to establish myself, being engaged in my community even more, and giving myself the opportunity to spread my wings and do what it is I believe I was made to do.



Celina Miranda

Recreating a Sense of Home

wo years ago our *home* was disrupted as a result of the pandemic. As with many other institutions across the globe, at Hyde Square Task Force (HSTF) we had to figure out how to continue our work in the middle of unprecedented uncertainty.

At HSTF we center our work on caring for young people unconditionally and helping them see their inherent worth along the way. Before the pandemic, our building was buzzing with energy connection, and joy each afternoon. Youth would walk into the building, greeting staff and one another with hugs. There would be laughter as youth sat together to eat before programming started. Youth would chat with staff about how their day went. They would sing or eagerly jump on instruments to rehearse, filling the hallways with music before programming officially began. Simply put, they felt at ease and safe to be themselves. COVID struck and changed all that in an instant. No more laughter, no more breaking bread, no more jamming or singing songs. No more feeling safe. We quickly realized that we had to pivot and figure out how to carry on in new ways.

Often, youth describe HSTF as a *home*. A key question as the pandemic hit was how to keep going in light of so much turmoil across our city and beyond, without losing sight of the many challenges our youth and their families were facing. We recognized that our brown and black youth were hurting not only from the consequences of the health pandemic, but also in light of the ongoing racially-motivated discrimination, hate, and violence they were witnessing or experiencing firsthand. We knew that despite the challenges our

work needed to continue, even across distance. Our primary aim in pivoting to a virtual delivery model was to replicate or keep hold of the familial feeling our young people so often voice without the advantage of in person interactions. It was critical to continue showing up for our youth and their families in meaningful ways. It was even more important for HSTF to figure out how to uphold this feeling of home during such turbulent times. How to continue to be that refuge: that safe place for our youth to let go and be themselves without reservation?

Recreating a sense of home required ingenuity and a commitment to push ourselves in new ways. Right from the start we realized that we needed to supplement our work to meet our youth and families with what the moment called for. The shutdown added financial strain to already vulnerable households. Isolation exacerbated feelings of loneliness and harmed social emotional wellbeing. In response, we began to distribute basic need items and supplemented incomes with gift cards for groceries and other critical household needs. We also doubled down our social emotional support by offering virtual one-onone meetings with youth to discuss the emotional challenges they were facing and identify healthy coping strategies. We made sure our youth knew that despite the physical distance support was only a touch screen away at all times. This was reinforced with Self-Care Kits that provided young people with an additional touch point and resources they could turn to when things became overwhelming. HSTF also distributed equipment (i.e., musical instruments, yoga mats, computers) to decrease barriers to participation

We would like for you to reflect on the process of recreating home space at your organization at this moment in the pandemic. in virtual programming as much as possible. All these actions extended the borders of our HSTF home beyond our building and into our participants' home spaces.

Our staff swiftly equipped themselves with skills that allowed them to use new platforms to continue offering our engaging programming, at a time when our young people needed HSTF the most. While delivery of music, dance, and theatre lessons continued to be important, the most critical aspect was not the content of the lessons. What became most important was finding new ways of building community. In a time when isolation was taking a toll on our young people, making sure they felt connected to one another and to HSTF staff was crucial. This continues to be a major focus as we approach our third year of the pandemic. While high quality programming remains important, HSTF staff are being intentional about creating connections with and among youth. Youth also contribute immensely to this sense of community. For example, youth on our dance team rarely take the five-minute breaks they are given and shut off their Zoom screens. Instead, they step away for a moment to grab a snack and then return to Zoom to catch up with one another. After being in virtual mode for so long and in different states of isolation, creating a sense of home has become even more pressing. We keep meeting young people where they are at and create safe spaces (whether virtual or in-person) for quality and meaningful interactions. An unintended benefit to being virtual for so many months was HSTF's ability to enter the homes of young people in a more intimate way than it had done in the past. By encouraging connections, HSTF staff extended the experiences they were creating beyond the youth participant. It was not surprising to have a younger sibling participate alongside a HSTF youth on a music lesson or have a parent spontaneously join in as dance classes were taking place. These moments were special and kept us connected to our youth.

After a year of fully remote programming, our building is slowly coming back to life. Summer 2021 brought back in-person programming. In-person programming, however, has not looked the same. Masked faces continued to be the norm and a reduced number of youth have returned to the building. Our in-person programming has been interrupted as we navigate rising numbers. This has required ongoing nimbleness and flexibility on the part of our youth and staff. Despite this, youth continue to find refuge in each other and with HSTF staff. Conversations up and down the hallway have led to new connections among youth and adult staff that we no longer take for granted. We realize that our work is not only in the formal instruction of music, dance, and theatre, but in the informal interactions we all have with one another. While the pandemic is far from gone, it has taught us to value community in more pronounced ways. It is in the act of being together in safe and nurturing ways that we recreate the sense of home time and time again.

DeLashea Strawder

Where the heART Lives

he spaces creative youth development programs aim to co-create and maintain with young people are rich, deep, and necessary for healing, hope, and thriving communities. Yet in Detroit, amid the compounding trauma of multiple health crises and socio-economic hardship, inequity of access increased.

Age 13 young artist sits across from me and pointedly described what she names as being ostracized while seemingly at the pinnacle of popularityfeeling trapped between others' perceptions and her reality. The music paved the way for this conversation to take place.



16 and he's convinced he must decide,

before junior year even starts,

what he's going to be for the rest of his life.

Words from inner and outer circles rising

they were drowning out his own.

He's hoping

coaches won't result to ultimatums because if he's made to choose

the team he'll likely stick to

plays under spotlights, not the Friday night ones Coach is used to.

The fact that we honor each voice, and contribution as valid and valued made space for open dialogue and reaffirmed him as he journeyed through.

I entered this work at 15,

After what felt like an eternity of being boxed in and voiceless.

Between school and societal pressure,

constantly being measured

by European beauty standards

and subjective scales of aptitude.

My 4.125 g.p.a did nothing

to reflect how I was managing

the attack the world had launched against me

or prepare me for the roadblocks

I'd have to traverse carefully

being black, female, shapely, and hearing things differently.

These are merely glimpses of the space Mosaic's walls hold.

Just a peek of what called me back to ensure there was room for other Detroit-area youth on their own journey to becoming whole -

honoring their truth,

recognizing their power,

and rediscovering their voice

in order to shape a better present, future and world.

When COVID-19 sent all of us away from the place we called our second home, it removed young people from their community and the spaces in which they find safety, healing, and hope. For many participants in Mosaic, music and the arts themselves are sacred spaces. They provide refuge, restoration, and the support one needs to carry on. But, the pandemic unceremoniously inserted measure upon measure of silence and mile after mile of distance.

Even with intentional joint planning and creative facilitation, coming together with youth through video conferencing doesn't compare. Where laughter and the excitement from feeding off each other's energy once flowed seamlessly, there was, "you're on mute."

In the places where collective creativity, improv, and musical magic thrived, a dreadful delay killed the vibe. Wires crossed as text communication left much to be desired, giving new meaning to "when words fail, music speaks." Masked and battling poor internet reception, we found ourselves robbed of the ability to read and respond to social cues- and other uniquely human things.

Many can relate to the yearning for "home" — the call back to the space where you feel most centered. Home is where the heART lives. It provides all the right ingredients, room, and care needed to meet our needs and fuel our motivations. This shared understanding connected the Mosaic family (young artists, alumni, teaching artists, schools and other partners) across state lines and digital divides. It challenged us to embrace the opportunity to activate a broader collective of stakeholders with a shared vision to see youth thrive and bring a long-awaited and powerful homecoming to fruition.

Emboldened by a commitment to holistically prioritize young people's emotional, physical, and mental health and safety, necessity would again bring forth innovation. Alumni and community partners jumped in to provide group and private counseling opportunities for youth, alumni, and families. Mosaic partnered with parents and music professionals to battle social isolation with music making. Cars became personal audio booths, enabling youth to again be collaborative music makers, hearing, responding, healing through creating together in real-time. Open fields transformed into open-air practice rooms to enable physicallydistant but emotionally-connected rehearsals for creative exploration.

Centering young people, we continued to challenge our thinking about equity of access when dual pandemics consistently increased and revealed inequity. Unable to safely bring everyone together under the same roof just yet, we leaned into our values to reimagine meeting people where they are. Mosaic partnered with students, teachers and administrators from eight school communities across Metro Detroit to virtually collaborate on creating music based on themes of courage, forgiveness and transformation. Porches transformed into stages, and neighborhood lots became gathering places and day camp locations. Cellphones offered the young and young at heart the opportunity to embrace their inner filmmaker and music producer, as iPads created windows into nontraditional rehearsal halls. Through strategic partnerships, Mosaic was able to provide hotspots, green screens and other equipment needed for setting up, streaming and editing. Working with directors, college professors, and video editors, college prescreens transformed into acceptance, scholarships and smoother transitions.

Our homecoming journey has not yet ended; it continues to evolve. Equipped with greater knowledge and resources to keep each other healthy and safe, Mosaic has returned to indoor programming. We continue to actively cocreate and maintain safe and brave spaces, albeit with new meaning. And we honor our learnings about what it means to support and join hands in generating heART spaces for and with others who can't come to the building we call home. We look forward with hope and great anticipation to joining arm in arm with youth and community to continue animating porches, playscapes, neighborhood lots, virtual and traditional stages. And to developing more creative professional education and career pathways pipelines to enrich our world with diverse perspectives.

Driven by a vision to see increased equity of opportunity for Detroit-area youth, Mosaic is working with young people to ensure all young people have greater access to creative youth development spaces that their heARTS can call home on their journey toward healing and wholeness.

Christopher Thornton

Bringing Together a Tapestry of Community

hrough our music we connect with our histories, stories and lifeways. Through music we give reverence and honor to our ancestors. Through our music we nurture a love and appreciation for the triumphs and struggles of our ancestors. For many of us in the African diaspora, music is one of the most visible means by which we have preserved, carried on and created new ways of living, being and caring for one another.

Beyond the Bars follows in the work and footsteps of our community and ancestors.

Beyond The Bars is a student driven music community of young musicians, teachers, community members and organizations. For many of the incredible and

Music is a space, an action, an experience, a connector.

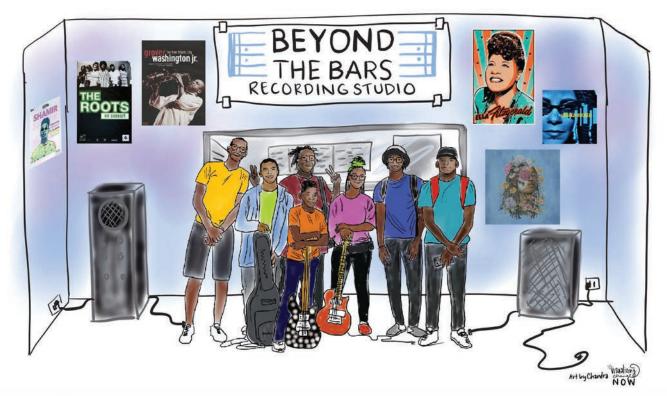
talented young people that enter our community the first step of the process is an open ended invitation for them to experience the joy of creating, recording and playing music, learning and passing along knowledge and wisdom to other young people and to do so while being surrounded and supported by an amazing cast of caring teachers, other young musicians, and community members. This invitation and vibe, cocreated through the years by each and every one of the people involved with Beyond The Bars leaves space for youth to enter and show up into our spaces where they are as they are and to engage with music and our community in ways that feel good, encouraging, and energizing. This student-driven and student centered approach allows students to choose their own path as they navigate the experience of making music and engaging with and further developing the BTB community.

The Beyond The Bars community is made up of young musicians with a wide variety of life experiences,

backgrounds and geographies. Coming together around a shared love of music, young people, and fellowship, our folks create new space for ourselves to feel at home, seen, loved and cared for. The warm and loving vibe, created in large part by the teachers who join students on their musical journey, helping to assist and guide them along their way, creates the space in which students are able to draw energy, rest and rejuvenation from the community and process of playing and creating music in an open and inviting setting. While a great deal of our students have experienced wonderful and encouraging home and school life experiences, many students have also faced immense hardships and challenges within these and other spaces. No matter where along the spectrum student's experiences lie, Beyond The Bars serves as a third or fourth home space for many students, allowing them access to additional space and sites to have loving and connecting experiences in a safe and encouraging environment.

Beyond The Bars is a tapestry of community partners, teachers, community leaders, young people and their caretakers which works to create as many entry points for youth into our community and practice as possible. All around the city—at over 30, and by the end of this year, 40 sites and counting—We are building student driven music programs centering on music production and recording as well as on playing contemporary instruments in Recreation Centers, Youth Shelters, Youth Serving Community Organizations and other sites in neighborhoods all over Philadelphia. These spaces include YeahPhilly! In West Philadelphia,

NOMO in North and South Philly, both of which serve youth who have been affected by violence, CB Community Schools in Roxborough which serves youth who have experienced foster care, Covenant House in Germantown which serves youth who are experience housing insecurity, Galei in Norris Square who serve LGBTI and BIPOC youth or any of the many of other partner spaces that work with us to provide accessible music programs to youth all over our city. This beautiful tapestry also means that while the BTB community is poised to engage youth in a way that is centered around music, being connected to so many critical and



incredible youth serving organizations means that we are able to act as a conduit for connecting youth who may need additional services to our partners may be able to offer them.

At Beyond The Bars our students, teachers, and community use music as a medium for us to build deeper connections amongst each other, process and move through our experiences and feelings joy, love, grief, and loss that we encounter throughout our lives and larger community, and to create new spaces that allow us to both reclaim our city as a space that is our home. We believe that young people deserve to be embedded in and surrounded by inviting, safe, youthdriven spaces that help them adequately meet their goals and needs. Youth and people in our community deserve to be able to fully engaged in spaces that center young people's passion for music, ability to create and maintain deep connections with each other, as well as to have their non-negotiable right to have their social, emotional and creative needs met within their community.

Music creates a sort of third space within us, within whatever space we bring it into. It has the power to illuminate spaces within ourselves that we may not know exist. It has the power to transform the most sterile spaces into dens of warmth, connectivity and action. This space has the ability to host and accompany us over vast distances of time and space. Music for us, in our black, diasporic community, is a site of ongoing remembrance and reverence for not only our first hand experiences, whether joyful or strugglesome, music connects us to the places we have called-home as many as they may be. Music connects us to the spaces and places where we have lived, loved, learned, where we have created and built space for ourselves and our communities, whether we chose to occupy these spaces, were forced to make them our own or were excluded from spaces we should have been able to occupy. Music connects us to the past, to our experiences of the people that have come before us, to the ways in which our communities have cared for each other, have passed on knowledge, have remembered our connections to each other and to the earth. Music reminds us of where we come from, of the the fact that our homes have been many places, that our folks and communities have persevered and maintained through incredible circumstances and struggles and through that time they have preserved and created as necessary, tools and methods for loving and caring for each other, for expressing their feelings, ideas, wisdom, and not the least, for nourishing our souls, our spirits, our bodies and our minds.

In our community Beyond The Bars is just one of many sites where young students, young learners, young teachers, young leaders and their extended community are following in the footsteps and groundwork of our community and ancestors to engage in the practice of music as a means to create new home spaces, strengthen already existing home spaces as well their communities and connection to each other and themselves. We couldn't be more grateful to be one thread among many in the tapestry of people, community groups, and organizations that support our youth and community as a whole.

