

# Youth Advocacy:

# CENTERING YOUTH TO DRIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE

The Guild collaborates with and serves many arts organizations where young creatives are at the front and center of social justice and organizing work. Being a youth-centered organization or program means investing in youth leadership and working in partnership with young artists to build community, advocate for better policies, and respond to the holistic needs of youth and families.

The following article shares excerpts from interviews with young artists and adult accomplices working in solidarity at youth-centered organizations across the country to affect social change.

## **RYSE**

Richmond, CA

Tara Malik, Media Arts and Culture Director; Ciera (Cici) Jevae Gordon, Media Arts and Culture Manager; and Jahiem Geovanni (Geo) Jones, Youth Organizer

*RYSE creates safe spaces grounded in social justice for young people to love, learn, educate, heal, and transform lives and communities. In service to RYSE's Theory of Liberation, the Media, Arts, + Culture (MAC) Department promotes personal healing, social justice, and community transformation by facilitating young people's innovative creation of personal, political, and expressive media and art to shift the narrative about youth.*

**CICI:** In the Media Arts Center at RYSE, our work is thinking about how to utilize art to allow young folks to cope with what is happening in their lives, as well as giving them platforms to share their stories. The way I think about it, art is political by nature. A lot of the art we are making is about our own lived experience: gentrification, police brutality, all of those things. We do

a lot of campaigning around here, around elections and different ballot initiatives. But we also do the work to gear up for doing that: how do we process our emotions around the election? We do that through poetry and art. For me, it's always making sure that our [Theory of Liberation](#) is embedded in all the work that we do. In other words, how are we thinking about ways to equip young people with the tools necessary to not only navigate systems, but eventually disrupt them? This means creating programming that is a combination of arts, culture, organizing, health, justice, and education.

**GEO:** I came to RYSE through poetry after someone came to my school to talk about their programs (see [page 11](#) for a piece of Geo's poetry). My poetry has always been about race and my identity, so I started writing more about social justice. That's how I brought these worlds of media arts and organization and social justice together, through healing and transformation.

I do a lot at RYSE now, but I think one of the biggest things was working on a ballot measure called Kids First Richmond and Measure H, which were campaigns that demanded the city to give funding to youth ages 0-24, and funding that through property taxes. I also do a lot of work around revamping the district's budget and getting funding allocated for 19 schools where many students were English language Learners. We worked to get money for programs that would get students on a path to graduation, decrease suspension rates, and lower chronic absenteeism. Outside of that work, I've done a lot of work that is centered around organizing, especially the issue of gentrification in our neighborhood. We have taken part in the walk-outs during the Trump inauguration, the March for Our Lives, and events commemorating the 2012 Chevron explosion.

Personally, art is just a necessity. It's just something we need to do. I know if I haven't written a poem in a while, I need to take time to sit down and write a poem. It's a way of alleviating stress and anxiety. That's something that we value and center, so that youth can come in and not feel like they have to check their feelings at the door to do the organizing work.

**TARA:** In our work as an organization, creativity and youth leadership are central to everything that we do. For example, almost half of our staff used to be members at the center. If you are looking at systems transformation, or at dismantling systems that oppress us, you are not going to do that by using systems that are a part of white supremacy or any dominant social norms. You have to rebuild, strategize, and use the insights of the people who are most impacted by those issues – for us, that is young people of color.

**GEO:** It's about youth power. Youth power is when something is youth driven, youth oriented, youth led, and youth impacted. It's not just me telling Cici something so she can tell Tara. It's me being able to say it myself. It's me being at the table. That's what a youth-friendly city looks like.

**CICI:** What's really key in our work is that young folks

understand that it is a partnership in this work. At council meetings, for example, we don't have adult allies to speak for youth, but to create space for young people to speak. Young people are the ones who are taking over these systems and structures and molding them, so we need to create a space where youth are really at the table.

## **RE:FRAME YOUTH ARTS CENTER**

*Phoenix, AZ*

*Ashley Hare, Co-Founder and Adult Accomplice; and Alexandra McWatters, Staff Member*

*RE:FRAME Youth Arts Center is a place for and by young folks to artistically resist the decentering of their power, rights, and identities. RE:FRAME will always center the leadership of young people in our programming, administration, and boardroom with full voting rights. RE:FRAME invest in the top of the Ladder of Youth Participation where youth and adults share power as both facilitators and learners of knowledge. We practice a shared leadership model where no titles or hierarchies exist.*

**Ashley:** RE:FRAME's first organizing project was about our community of South Phoenix, where only a few of us are from originally. We decided, if we are going to

*RE:FRAME youth walking on Central Avenue*



occupy land in South Phoenix, we have to understand the historic context of the place. From this, “Rio to the Mountain” was born, a digital storytelling map that youth created. We are in the middle of a huge displacement battle in our community because the light rail system is being expanded right down Central Avenue. We lost the vote in August and they started construction, so we are already seeing displacement. For this project, a team of ten young people walked up Central Avenue from the river to the mountain, the two boundaries of South Phoenix. Young people used all kinds of art to document displacement on the map, using photography, storytelling, poetry, and more to document for-sale signs, the storefronts, the changes in the neighborhood. This project contributed to the creation of our media center, now our biggest project.

In addition to this, we are in community with groups like Black Lives Matter and other local groups doing community organizing work on the ground. We are able to bring a youth lens to the work; traditionally there aren’t a lot of young people in these conversations. Some of the young people who come to RE:FRAME come in to see the work that we are doing and are like: “Organizing is usually so dogmatic. There’s a talking point, adults are leading it.” But young people want to have a say in those talking points to share what matters to them.

Our work, in the truest sense of Creative Youth Development, is all about merging social justice with wellness. Youth understand that there are things that need to be nourished! Our organization is located in a house; there are showers; there’s a bed; there is a kitchen where we cook and eat together. You have to think about love and nourishment! That’s what draws people to this work and keeps us going in organizing and advocacy. As an adult accomplice, my role is to not give them answers, but ask questions and trust them in the ways they are thinking. When someone comes to us and says, “I don’t know how to do X thing,” we don’t show them. We ask “why do you think you don’t know how to do X? What are the barriers?” And then we have a dialogue together to get to an answer.

**Alex:** I am a staff member at RE:FRAME Youth Arts Center. As a staff member I help organize workshops, maintain the center and collaborate in partnerships we have with other organizations. There are various parts that go into organizing our workshops whether it be by reaching out to community members, artists or young people in the area. I have been involved in the light rail extension project, and the stories of community within

## I’ve too Lost Someone To War

(Original Piece)

by Jahiem Geovanni Jones

*Raise your hand if you’ve lost someone to war  
Sitting here hesitating to raise my hand  
Wondering if I ever lost someone to war  
As matter as fact, yes I did  
But not wars in the past  
But wars happening in these streets  
It’s like they forced us out on battlefield  
Gentrification displaced every loved one out of housing  
On the streets where police lit up all blocks  
I sit here and count gunshot wounds of every victim forced in war  
Slaughtered or go against the all mighty  
Counting on my fingers how many I’ve lost  
1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10 list keeps going but the journey never ends  
How come we never acknowledge the wars that are going on right now  
Like the ICE raids, the Mass Shootings, or Housing Crisis  
Its like you thought we supported this country  
When I say we submerged our bodies in this soil  
It’s because we feel connected to our ancestors they killed and buried  
Of war they never declared  
When we fought against all hope  
We never have the chance to talk about today’s war  
Like if someone had died will they be in our textbooks  
Distorted for injustice  
We never lost this war  
There was no unanimous vote against who was stronger  
Because at the end of the day we fought for our lives  
And still to this day this war continues*

“From Rio to the Mountain.” The work with RE:FRAME is definitely different from other spaces I’ve worked in. Our center is truly a space of love and caring people. We want to support each other, in any way we can for each other. I think in other spaces, it can be kind of weird in that you might relate to some people and enjoy similar interests, but your relationship with them is strictly confined to a 9-5 job. I think it’s different because we all try to enjoy each others’ presence. We know what we are doing is something important.

In any event we have, there is always a youth presence and role in leadership. For example, at many of our workshops, we have an outside community member share their practices, and we have had a youth staff member join them in facilitation. Our staff and board is made up of 50% youth under 20 and 50% adult accomplices, too. It has made my experience with RE:FRAME a lot more comfortable, trusting, relatable and fun. I think having the relationship we all do on staff

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Nations which has not ratified the CRC.

Regardless, though, there is a lot to be learned from the international dialogue about the right to arts and cultural education. There has been a large movement to change the narrative around arts education away from the more 'instrumental' arguments (like raised test scores, attendance, and graduation rates) to a more philosophical argument (like fundamental, civil, or human rights). Especially since we see young creative leading the charge of national and global movements, like Fridays for Future and A March for Our Lives, we have also witnessed a similar shift in the centering of young people and a reiteration of the urgency to deal with the arts gap once and for all.

In October 2019, at the World Alliance for Arts Education conference, held in Frankfurt, Germany, delegates from 49 nations crafted the Frankfurt Declaration, which stresses the urgency to reform supports for arts education in nations around the globe and implores government agencies to take action:

"[We] call for transformative action for arts education as being integral to sustaining communities and meeting the needs of all people in the face of critical global challenges...[This] Declaration celebrates the unprecedented arts performances linked to ... movements led by children and young people throughout the world. It asserts arts education as a right for all towards the nurturing of a paradigm of solidarity, cooperation and good living"

Through this declaration, the parties express their desire to hold a 3rd World Congress on Arts Education, which will foster the exchange of ideas and urge policy development to close arts gaps (like the ones seen in the United States, and specifically in California) and fully embrace a new narrative of arts education as a fundamental, civil, and human right.

### **"We Can't Have Creative Dead Zones"**

In Amir's keynote, he urged those in attendance – artists, educators, youth, and more – to not let us allow any more creative dead zones. By this he means we have to use our voice to drive change and close the arts gaps. We can do this by understanding this change of frame and by joining or creating coalitions to hold governments accountable.

Whether in your own community, at your state capitol, in Washington, D.C., or on the world stage, we as community arts leaders must take action. It begins by understanding the policies which impact our work, synthesizing the data to find solutions, changing our frame of argument and mobilizing for the cause.

This is our charge: learn, speak up, and take action.

*'Youth Advocacy,' continued from page 11*

of being very open, trusting and respectful allows us to share freely in what we really think. Transparency is big for us. I think in a lot of other spaces that try to involve youth, it's common for a lot of information to be held back from young people and their voice to not hold as much power in some situations. Because of our dynamic within RE:FRAME, we are able to share our different experiences as we are all in different stages of our life. All of staff is in a constant state of learning what is happening with young people, what is happening in our communities, life skills and real world lessons we may have not gotten from other parts in our life.

## **Creative Action & Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble**

Austin, TX

*Micky Johnson, Youth Leader*

*Creative Action's Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble is delivered in partnership with Expect Respect—a program of SAFE (formerly SAFE Place). Since 2003, Changing Lives involves teen artist-activists that create and tour original, youth-led performances focused on violence prevention, healthy relationships, and social justice.*

I am a part of a group called Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble, which is made up of 20-25 high school students from 9th-12th grade from across Austin. We learn about social justice all around Austin; We educate ourselves; We learn about how these issues impact our daily lives. There is one theme every year, and this year's theme is 'jealousy.' We write about it as a group, and then we go into middle schools to tour around and perform.

Changing Lives opened me up to the world of social justice and activism. Even though activism was something I was always interested in, I didn't have the resources to act on that interest. This is my fourth year in Changing Lives, and now I have the honor of being a peer leader and an assistant director.

Overall, social justice work is really heavy. Conversations get overwhelming and difficult but doing this work with art eases the stress of it all. Art helps balance out the heavier stuff and combining these worlds of social justice and art allows me to bring the skills I have in my creative part of my life to the organizing part of my life. Whenever I have met people combining social justice and art, it just feels like a different approach than most organizing. It creates a community that makes this work easier to do. For me, it is second nature to make things, and to make things with other people.