



YOUTH ENRICHMENT SERVICES

Community News, YES Updates, Spotlights, & more!

December 2024

Finishing Strong: A Year of Growth, Gratitude, and Impact at YES



As a former high school and college athlete (co-captain of our college wrestling team), my team and I always believed that the only way to end any competitive event was to finish strong. And when I look at YES in 2024, I can certainly say we have finished strong with our heads held high. To acknowledge the journey YES has been on, here is a brief recap of this year's accomplishments:

As it pertains to our violence prevention efforts, to date, all of our youth who started with us are still with us, alive and healthy. And for that we are grateful. We continue to pray and do the necessary work to ensure we move into the new year without losing any of our precious students for the 2nd year in a row.

Furthermore, the two-day violence intervention symposium that was conducted at the University of Pittsburgh this past summer was a monumental success with outcomes that we continue to benefit from as we lay the groundwork for 2025.

And of course, our 30-year anniversary, where we had over 300 participants attend our 3-day celebration that raised over \$70,000. This was the first time that YES, in our 30-year existence, garnered this much financial support from an event. In addition to the financial contributions, we also found commitment from several sustaining donors, new board members, and potential advisory members for the future. Check out our [30 year report](#) and [interactive visual recap presentation](#) to relive the events.

The past summer Learn and Earn program was probably the most powerful testament to our young people's curiosity. They dug deep into science investigation and disciplined inquiry and produced spectacular research projects that amazed everyone who attended our Research Colloquium in August.

We also value and appreciate the new staff members that came on this past year. They have been able to jump in and become a part of the team, and day by day continue to grow with the agency.

YES was featured in national conferences in Minneapolis, state conferences in Lancaster and Harrisburg, and regional conferences in Pittsburgh, where we featured the science-based approach to our work that was recognized and valued.

We also appreciated interns this summer from our growing partnership with the University of Pittsburgh School of Health and Carnegie Mellon University Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. These students add immense value to YES and play an integral role in transforming our ideas into action and implanting knowledge into our youth.

And finally, we were grateful to allow Olivia Kelley, our Senior Communications, Systems and Organization Strategy Leader, and Denise Jones, our Deputy Director, to return back to DePaul University and University of Michigan, respectively, to finish their academic degrees. Although they still put in many more hours per week than we would like, we recognize the steady movement towards completion of their degrees. We continue to wish them well towards their completion in 2025.

Once again, we want to thank you for being such strong stakeholders, friends, donors, and committed community partners. Your positive energy, constant support at our events, donations and contributions, meeting attendance and participation, all factor into YES being the most highly tuned and functional youth development organization in the region.

We look forward to continuing our march towards greatness, and we need you to come along with us.

We are one team with one dream!

Best wishes,



Dennis Jones, PhD

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

YES' 2024 YCLA Fall Cohort Successfully Completes Academy



On Monday, December 16th, our Youth Civic Leadership Academy (YCLA) Research Symposium concluded an extraordinary semester of inspiration with our Fall 2024 YCLA Cohort. The event spotlighted the transformative power of youth-driven research and leadership as our

YCLA Scholars and YCLA Vets proudly presented their projects to an audience of friends, family, YES staff, partners, stakeholders, and the local Pittsburgh community. This symposium was an event beyond celebration, rather, it was a testament to the determination, the creativity, and the passion in our youth.



Each project engaged critical social issues—pressing matters such as the juvenile justice system and truancy, teen drug use, lack of youth civic engagement, extremely high rates Black female maternity mortality, and a host of other hot topic issues that directly affect the youth and their communities.



Through profound thoughtfulness and deep commitment to creating meaningful change, YES youth also presented innovative solutions that young people are uniquely positioned to ideate, such as hosting a “City in the Street” party next year in Homewood as an effort to make the neighborhood feel like a thriving and connected community.



It was a proud moment for everyone involved to witness the depth of insight, confidence, and leadership demonstrated by our YCLA Scholars and Vets.



STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

Former YCLA Participant, Faith Jackon, is a Rising Star

"My time in the Youth Civic Leadership Academy (YCLA) with Youth Enrichment Services taught me a lot about civic engagement within my community. By granting me the chance to talk to government officials, including the Mayor of Pittsburgh, about issues pertinent to our city, it gave me a better understanding of the work that goes into making a community safer. The academy gives students the chance to earn college credit while still in high school and to get a glimpse of college life and make a change. During my time as a participant, I met



students with similar experiences and ideals as me, making the process of formulating the project easier, with the help of YES staff. As someone who is not the most informed about the political processes within the city, the program definitely helped motivate me to give more attention to governmental matters because I know they will inevitably impact my generation."

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

YES Provides Holiday Resources and Gifts to Families

This holiday season YES staff, donors, and volunteers pulled together to provide and deliver Holiday gifts and meals to Pittsburgh families. When we think back on our own childhoods, Christmas time can be a mixture of emotions—joy & excitement, and sometimes disappointment & sorrow.

The holidays can be a stressful time of year, especially when considering the cost of goods. However, through generous donations from YES Champions Cheryl & Craig Darsow, Carl & Cindy Rothenberger, and Barb Cardinal-Busse & Tom Busse, some of that pressure has been alleviated for YES youth and their families!

Under the bold leadership of one of our own Melinda Jones, over 40 families had their wishlists fulfilled, wrapped, and ready for opening on Christmas morning, creating unforgettable and irreplaceable family memories. We cannot express enough the impact these donations make in our students' lives and the community beyond.



YES Stakeholders Celebrate the Holiday Season Together

The YES family was fortunate to have not 1, not 2, but 3 separate holiday celebrations this season! We kicked things off with the annual holiday dinner at the Jones Family compound. Guests were treated to a delicious meal prepared by none other than our leader, Dr. Jones, great conversation with the eclectic and diverse attendees, and a personal introduction to Pittsburgh native Melva Graham and her debut novel *Your Black Friend Has Something To Say*, which Goodreads calls "a powerful debut and an intimate examination of race and identity." Many party attendees were lucky enough to walk away with their very own signed copy as a raffle prize.



YES Team Celebrates a Year of Triumph, Growth, & Impact

Our next celebration was a staff potluck and gift exchange with staff members. Working at YES is just as demanding as it is rewarding, so having the opportunity to sit with colleagues and share holiday stories, recipes, and food from the heart was a sweet way to celebrate as a team. YES staff members were also treated to a lovely watercolor from board member Barb Cardinal-Busse, commemorating the 30 year anniversary celebration.



YES Students Convene for Meaningful Holiday Celebration

Our final holiday celebration was held with our wonderful program participants. Over 40 students attended and enjoyed games, a warm meal, and the holiday spirit with YES staff and families. Some youth attendees have not been active this school year, but when the invitation from YES arrived, they responded! A recent graduate of the program even made a special point of returning to Pittsburgh in time for the event. This is the mettle of YES. We work tirelessly to build these connections to our students and our communities. And it shows!



Thanks to everyone who participated in the YES holiday celebrations! We are grateful that you chose to spend your time with us, and we cannot wait to see you next year!

2024: A Year of Growth and Insight

Students Reflections

We asked our students to reflect on their year with YES and we were humbled and grateful to hear their responses. Take a moment to read directly from the youth how they describe the work YES does and the impact of your support!

