



# YOUTH ENRICHMENT SERVICES

*Community News, YES Updates, Spotlights, & more!*

MAY 2024

## The Look in their Eyes is Real: Message from Dr. Jones



We are thrilled to announce that nine of our students have graduated from top colleges with impressive degrees. My staff and I attended many of their graduations, with Denise traveling to New York University, Baldwin Wallace University, Penn State University, and Allegheny College. The most telling sign of their accomplishment was the look in their eyes as they received their degrees, a truly precious sight.

Over the past four years, COVID-19 dulled the world and dimmed the sparkle in their eyes. These students, who left for college bright-eyed and full of hope, faced unimaginable challenges. The pandemic sent them home, stripped them of their freedom, and left several homeless. One student has even shared with us that they had no home to return to after leaving for college due to their family moving to California.

YES stepped in to support our students in every way possible. We turned our office into a classroom, provided internet access, and used Instacart to deliver food to their families. We paid biweekly stipends to help students cover their basic needs and raised funds to cover delinquent tuition. Once COVID restrictions were lifted, we visited colleges and advocated for our students. We found creative solutions to meet internship and externship requirements, including local and virtual internships. The dedication from universities to see these students graduate matched our own. Despite the bureaucracy and financial hurdles, our collaborative efforts ensured their success.

Lastly, I encourage you to review the 2024 Spring iteration of the YCLA program. It has been another resounding success. The third iteration of our Youth Civic Leadership Academy wrapped up on May 15th at the Heinz History Center! Our cohort of 20 scholars showcased their incredible dedication and passion after completing a rigorous 17-week program. Their hard work was truly commendable as they presented innovative solutions to a range of pressing issues. The event was a vibrant display of creativity and hard work, with students eagerly presenting their findings. We are incredibly proud of our youth for taking an initiative to make the world around them a better place.

Best wishes,

Dennis Jones, PhD

# ALUMNI HIGHLIGHTS

## YES Celebrates Alumni Post-Secondary Milestones

In this season, we are thrilled to highlight our most recent college graduates. many of whom started YES when they were 14 years old. These students have devoted themselves to accomplishing their goals, finishing their studies, and obtaining their degrees. Join us in celebrating their hard work, dedication, and commitment. Below, our graduates and their families reflect on how YES shaped their college journeys.



### Jordan McNeal '24, Music, Voice Concentration - Baldwin Wallace University

"Being truly yourself takes a lifelong [practice] of being present, providing yourself with grace as you move through life; there is nothing more fulfilling than experiencing your humanity and being in the moment throughout your life." I have come to this realization in college and am thankful for the early seeds that YES planted within me. I appreciate their dedication to my success, opportunities to advance my skills, and experiences that shaped me as a lifelong learner. I know that without them - and my family - I would not have completed my post-secondary education. I am grateful for the endless sacrifices, support, and guidance from my village. I am especially grateful for Ms. Denise who has been a godsend, my angel. Thank you, YES, for your early belief in me and your nurturing practices along the journey." - **Jordan McNeal**

"Jordan originally joined YES because he wanted to piggyback on what his friends were getting involved in. But it didn't begin until he became involved in the YES program. It was as if God had immediately connected Jordan and Ms. Denise. Then everything just came into place. They got along well as if they were siblings, and she was extremely helpful to him. In every way imaginable, she was able to assist Jordan in finding schools to attend and then maintain that support throughout his enrollment. Words cannot express how much time and effort has been put into Jordan's future, and for that we are eternally grateful. A message to the youth: Please introduce yourself to the YES program. This program reminds me of the amount of support available in my childhood. Stick to the plan, and you will see positive results. Ask for assistance, and you will receive it. Again, thank you; I wouldn't have it any other way. Even if YES was located in Japan, I would find some way to reconnect Jordan with them". - **Jeffrey McNeal**



### **Makaila Holston-Smith '24, BioRenewable Energy - Penn State University**

“Walking across the commencement stage at The Pennsylvania State University and embracing Ms. Denise Jones filled me with indescribable joy and gratitude. Throughout the journey of applying to colleges, Ms. Jones, with her brilliance and warmth, guided me tirelessly, instilling in me a deeper sense of purpose to be great. Being a part of YES from the beginning to the end of my collegiate journey offered me invaluable mentorship, professional growth, internships, and a strong drive to become a community leader, inspired by the generosity YES bestowed upon me. I would also like to thank Olivia Kelly for her amazing support. Without YES, I wouldn't have been the ONLY black woman graduating from Penn State's 2024 class with a degree in BioRenewable Systems.” - **Makaila Holston-Smith**

“I am so grateful that YES played a pivotal role in my daughter's college preparation by providing invaluable guidance and mentorship. I would like to give a shout out to Ms. Denise for all of her time and personal sacrifice she poured into the program. She provided her expertise and advocated for the students so that they could have a chance to realize their dreams. I am now a proud mother of a graduate from Penn State. There are not enough words to express the gratitude I have for this program!” - **Sherry Holston**



### **Samone Broser '24, Economics - Allegheny College**

“My Journey at Allegheny has been a journey of meeting and connecting with wonderful peers and faculty members. I feel as though Allegheny was exactly where I needed to be as an undergraduate, I have gained leadership skills through the many opportunities they have provided and feel prepared to take the next step of going into a graduate program in Business. I appreciate YES for preparing me for my post-secondary journey and supporting me along the way. I am forever grateful for their investment in me.” - **Samone Broser**

### **Willie Knight '24, Communication Arts - Allegheny College**

“When everyone said the grass was greener on the other side, I didn't expect it to be so bright. Being at YES throughout my academic career has not only formed me into a critical thinker, but also encouraged me to become a change agent in my community. Joining YES in 2015, right before my freshman year of high school, was the beginning of a remarkable experience. YES has committed time, money, and enormous effort in my development, serving as a constant source of support throughout times of uncertainty and academic obstacles. Even at times of uncertainty, low academic achievement, and eventually taking a year off from school. I am grateful to have YES as a part of this crucial

point in my life, when I can witness firsthand my ability to preserve and strive for greatness.” - **Willie Knight**



“This is the season for commencements and celebrations. It makes me want to celebrate even more especially when it is my child receiving a wonderful accomplishment in graduating with a bachelor’s degree. I am super proud of my son, Willie, completing his degree. With a village behind him, I would not expect anything less. Willie has been blessed with the support of his family at home and major support with his family at YES. This organization has played a unique and pivotal role in helping to build and sustain the academic success of Willie.” - **Afreca Hicks**



**Lidia Pietrusza '24, Social Work - New York University**

“At YES, I experienced the value of mentorship and community. As a First-generation college graduate, I needed the support provided by YES to reach this monumental goal. Being involved in YES allowed me to tour colleges out-of-state and apply to schools I wouldn’t have otherwise applied to, like NYU. I also was given support in improving my writing skills. The friendships and connections I built are invaluable and have been imperative to my motivation and continued education. I am so excited to start this new chapter and the lessons, values, and connections I gained from the YES program will stay with me my entire career.”

- **Lidia Pietrusza**

“Nine years ago, when Lidia first joined the YES family as a Learn & Earn participant, I could never have imagined what an enormous impact that the organization would have on the course of her life, her personal development, and the fulfillment of her educational goals. Her work at YES helped build her self-confidence, shaped her career vision, and led her to study Social Work in the hopes to use her talents to make a difference in the world. If it were not for the insight and guidance from the YES team, especially the direct mentorship of Ms. Denise, she wouldn’t have broadened her vision and had the initiative to apply to such a selective college as NYU, where she received a full academic scholarship. And in the moments when the challenges of college life, young adulthood, and academic roadblocks made her feel like giving up, it was such a relief to me that we also had YES on our side to encourage Lidia to keep going and spur her across the finish line. The word “GRATEFUL” hardly expresses my incredible appreciation for the team at YES and the work they do to create successful, empowered, and confident leaders of the future.” - **Melinda Pietrusza**



## Jaquan Brockman '24, General Studies & Graphic Design - Community College of Allegheny County

"My collegiate experience can be described with many words, but I think that the best word to describe it is atypical. My journey began at Carlow University in 2018 immediately after high school as a political science major my freshman fall semester, a business management major my freshman spring semester, but I decided to switch to a general studies major to get a better understanding of my passions and interests after receiving a second chance due to my horrific academic performance my freshman year. I failed nearly all of my courses because I lacked a sense of purpose during this period of my life. I was genuinely lost, but nonetheless, YES still helped me appeal my status and re-enroll for the fall 2019 semester on academic probation. I was driven to make the most out of this opportunity and began to do what I was supposed to be doing from the start. At that time, I was enrolled in an introductory social work course and immediately fell in love with it. So much so, that I was intending on declaring it as my major for the following semester. However, I had a balance on my account that prohibited me from enrolling and since I was unable to pay it, I ultimately had to withdraw from Carlow at the end of my fall sophomore semester (December 2019). I planned on enrolling into CCAC for the following fall semester, but COVID began to shut the world down mere days before I was scheduled for my placement test the following March. So, instead of attempting to enroll in online courses, I decided to take a break from college and work until COVID began to stabilize and I could enroll in in-person instruction. I picked up photography during COVID, my hiatus from college, and at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, so I also made it a mission to uplift Black voices and Black beauty with my work. Once I did manage to enroll at CCAC as a general studies major, I was hired as the Media Specialist here at YES just a few months later (October 2021). At this point, I had decided that I wanted to pursue film and tv production since movies are essentially moving photos, so I had a clear purpose and that was reflected in my transcripts. During my first spring semester at CCAC, I enrolled in an introductory graphic design course and immediately fell in love with it. I later decided to add on a graphic design certificate program in addition to my general studies degree that I was already pursuing. I ended up graduating with my associate's in general studies and a graphic design certificate, both of which were with Honors while experiencing homelessness after my home was destroyed by an SUV at the beginning of my summer 2023 semester. I have also been accepted into the Savannah College of Art & Design as well as California College of the Arts for Film and Television Production and to this day, I have had eleven art exhibitions and fourteen publications of my portraits. I say all of this to emphasize that at the end of the day, it truly does not matter how you start or even what you thought your plan was because life has a funny way of putting you in front of people and opportunities to excel you in ways that you could not fathom just only five years ago. There's a million things I haven't done, yet I will forever be grateful to YES and I'm eternally glad to say that they were a part of my story."

-Jaquan Brockman



## Ramir Johnson '24, Business Administration and Management - Penn State University

“Learn & Earn and YES are a huge reason my journey was possible, helping me in more ways than I can explain. I only began attending YES in 2019 & 2020 my senior year of high school, but the environment was immediately warm and welcoming. Ms. Denise helped quite a lot when it came to navigating applying to colleges and making yourself look as presentable as possible. Without some of this advice my road to even applying to Penn State would have been infinitely tougher. YES and Learn & Earn also helped me a lot in career readiness and money-making opportunities throughout college. I am now graduating college with multiple years of paid internship experience because of these amazing opportunities. All these experiences also set me up

to handle Penn State's professional setting. College itself was like you would expect: a lot of work. It was fun and full of amazing times but again, a lot of work. Much like Learn & Earn was fun and amazing, it prepared me to handle the work.” - **Ramir Johnson**

## McKayla Dixon '23, Computer Science - Winston-Salem University

“My journey to this point has been greatly influenced by the YES program. I was able to take part in the HBCU trip due to their persistent support. This was a crucial experience that helped me decide to enroll at Winston Salem State University, from where I recently received a degree in computer science. My decision to relocate six hours away from home in order to pursue my degree at this prestigious college was reinforced by the exposure and insight I received from that tour. I made a big decision when I decided to major in computer science, and it was motivated by my love of technology and the support I got from YES program mentors. They gave me the resources I needed to succeed academically in addition to giving me opportunities to explore. By assisting me in enrolling in a SAT prep course, they helped me raise my scores considerably, which eventually opened doors for admission and boosted my confidence as a student. I genuinely appreciate the YES program's unwavering encouragement. Their support of my schooling has not only influenced my academic career but also established a solid foundation for my future achievements. I am a testament to the impact of their dedication to helping students like me our greatest potential.” - **McKayla Dixon**





**London Wright '23, Information Science - University of Pittsburgh**

“As a result of my college experience, I have gained a greater understanding of perseverance and resilience. I've always dreamed of a career in information science, and I've achieved it. With the knowledge I have gained over the years with YES, nothing could stop me from reaching the finish line of my academic journey at Pitt.”

- London Wright

## PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

### 2024 YCLA Students Successfully Present their Research at the Culminating Symposium



We are thrilled to announce the successful conclusion of the 3rd iteration of our Youth

Civic Leadership Academy (YCLA), which wrapped up in style on May 15th at the Heinz History Center! Our cohort of 20 scholars showcased their incredible dedication and passion after completing a rigorous 17-week program. The event was a vibrant display of creativity and hard work, with students eagerly sharing detailed information about their projects with stakeholders and parents at the symposium. The scholars' presentations focused on innovative solutions to a range of pressing issues, including community gardens, accessible transportation, transitional housing, sexual violence, waste reduction, and chronic suspensions. Students confidently discussed their procedures, conclusions, and the real-world implications of their work, while the audience participated in lively discussions, asking questions and providing input.

But that's not all! We are also immensely proud to highlight the contributions of our YCLA Vets, a group of students from our previous cohort who continue their impactful work. Their projects centered around addressing Pittsburgh homelessness and advocating for the representation of BIPOC in the media and are a testament to the lasting impact of the YCLA program. The environment was energetic and motivating, reflecting our students' passion and excitement, as well as the supporting community that surrounds them. Thank you to everyone who supported and participated in making this event a success! Stay tuned for more updates and inspiring stories from our YCLA community.







## YES Gears Up for Learn and Earn Program Season



It's that time of year again! Students and parents, be sure to sign up for a summer of work-based learning, fun, and earning opportunities. Each year, YES collaborates with Partner 4 Work and various partners to offer a summer experience filled with work and enriching activities, providing a safe and productive environment for children across the Pittsburgh region.

This year, we are partnering with over twenty different worksites across Pittsburgh to cater to your child's specific interests. Opportunities include working as a camp counselor at (potential worksite), assisting with an animal rescue league at (potential worksite), or gaining experience in potential future careers such as cosmetology, carpentry, and more. In addition to hands-on work, students will engage in a research topic of their choice throughout the summer, usually reflecting their personal interests. With all this growth and development on their Summer schedules, students will be supported by our interns from the University of Pittsburgh and Carnegie Mellon University, who will guide and assist

them throughout the summer, ensuring a valuable and enriching experience.

If you have children 14-21 years of age, please sign them up to join us this summer!

<https://www.partner4work.org/learn-earn/how-apply>

## INTERN HIGHLIGHTS

### Future Leaders Shine: YES Interns Mark the Beginning of their Bright Futures

Congratulations to our incredible YES interns on reaching this significant milestone in their academic journey! We are immensely proud of Aiwen Chen, Zaida Pearson, Emme Wetzel, and Tyshanti Montgomery for their outstanding achievements. As they graduate from esteemed institutions like Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Michigan, we celebrate their dedication, hard work, and contributions to the YES community over the years. Your passion, talent, and commitment have made a lasting impact, and we are confident that you will continue to excel in all your future endeavors. Best of luck on your next adventures and know that you will always be part of the YES family!



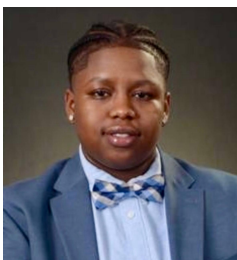
**Aiwen Chen '24** Carnegie Mellon University - Neuroscience and a minor in Philosophy. They have been at YES for 1 year.



**Zaida Pearson '24** University of Michigan - Psychology and a minor in Education for Empowerment. They have been at YES for 1 year.



**Emme Wetzel '24** Carnegie Mellon University - Information Systems and minors in Human Computer Interaction, French and Francophone Studies. They have been at YES for 2 years.



**Tyshanti Montgomery '24** Carnegie Mellon University - Statistics and Machine Learning. They have been at YES for 3 years.

## YES Partners with CMU to Develop a Project Management Tool through Systems Consulting Capstone Course



In our second year as a community partner with Carnegie Mellon University's (CMU) Information Systems (IS) Student Consultants, our partnership has helped provide solutions and systems to support challenges faced by community-based organizations. Our team this year was able to deliver two projects that will ultimately increase YES' capacity to do what we do best - serve and support our students in becoming their own best resource! Our student team developed a Wiki to support the training and onboarding of new staff on the technology we rely on at YES. This wiki will save countless hours and help us operate more efficiently.



The team also helped develop a project management system to help YES become more efficient in the planning and delivery of our Annual Summer Learn and Earn program. This system will save the Summer Learn and Earn team countless hours and help us improve our work distribution across staff. We truly appreciate the experience and expertise of our CMU IS Team!

[Sophie Reflects on her Internship with YES](#)



Sophie has interned with YES for over a year now. She has contributed greatly to YES' Power Hour Tutoring and Youth Civic Leadership Academy (YCLA). Take a few moments to learn why Sophie describes her internship with YES as “one of the best decisions [she] ever made.”

Watch our full interview with Sophie, [HERE!](#)

## STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

### YCLA Students Appear on SLB Radio Show



We are thrilled to share that our YES students, including Alexis Williamson Jones, Jaelen Jones, Amariah Wesley, Aline Germaine, Denni Estes, Cameron Jones, and Estella Irankunda, recently had the incredible opportunity to be interviewed by SLB Radio. During these interviews, our dynamic students discussed their innovative projects developed as part of the Youth Civic Leadership Academy (YCLA). Their experiences and insights reflect their passion, dedication, and the significant impact of our programs as they tackle community issues. Tune in to [SLB Radio](#) to hear their inspiring interview and learn more about the remarkable work they are doing.

## STAFF HIGHLIGHTS

### YES Welcomes New Team Members

**Meiloni Erickson** is a California native who obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Writing from Alaska Pacific University

**Meet Meiloni Erickson, YES' New Operations Manager**

and a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of New Orleans. She has an eclectic professional background from Title and Escrow work to College level English tutoring to small business operations of a neighborhood coffee shop. Meiloni is excited to take a step into a more contributive societal role and devote her professional energies to improving the world around us. Meiloni's personal projects are focused on urban gardening and creative writing with multiple publications of her fiction and non-fiction stories and essays. At YES, Meiloni will take on the role of Operations Manager, working to provide seamless office management and program support.



## Celebrating Our Educators: A Heartfelt Tribute on National Teacher's Day



**Melinda Jones:** National Teacher's Day is a time for intentional celebration of the teachers in our lives. The role of a teacher has always been one of steadfast leadership, unwavering support, and devotion to the young people we are charged with guiding. It is important that when you see a teacher, you thank a teacher. As a former teacher, I understand the importance of acknowledgment. Teaching really is a thankless job and at times that can produce feelings of being overlooked and undervalued, but this day proves that we are seen and acknowledged. I would like to take this opportunity and thank the teachers who motivated me to become a teacher. I thank the teachers who helped me become a better teacher. I thank the teachers who continue to show up everyday and enact change in their students' lives. You are seen, heard, and definitely appreciated!

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