

# The Saratoga Youth Council: Giving Youth Experiencing Homelessness a Platform for Individual Development and Community Building

By Mary Cummings, Max Rein,  
and Michael Chapman



The issues facing today's adolescents range from peer pressure and cyberbullying to climate change and a global pandemic. For students experiencing homelessness, factors like housing instability and stigma make an already difficult stage of life even more challenging. Afterschool programs across the nation are working with youth from all backgrounds to empower and support them as they navigate these circumstances.

"Students whose families are experiencing homelessness benefit tremendously from afterschool programs," says Jodi Grant, Executive Director of the Afterschool Alliance, an organization that works at the national, state, and local levels to ensure that all students have access to quality afterschool programs. "They make learning fun, give students opportunities to explore their interests and engage with peers and adults, and reinforce lessons from the school day. Afterschool programs have been especially important during the pandemic, when so many children are facing isolation, stress, and trauma."

Saratoga Family Residence, operated by Homes for the Homeless (HFH) and located in Jamaica, Queens, works with the students involved in its afterschool program to help them develop self-esteem, leadership skills, and inner strength—tools necessary to combat negative peer pressure. A critical component of the Saratoga afterschool program is its "Youth Council." The Saratoga Youth Council aims to give youth a voice, empowering participants under two umbrellas: individual development and community building.

The Council, formed in the summer of 2020, began when Michael Chapman, Director of Afterschool and Recreation at Saratoga Family Residence, noticed young adolescents at the shelter advocating for more program activities tailored to their age group. The Youth Council's original purpose was to unify the students and give members of the Council, ages nine to 15, a group identity and voice in how activities could be adapted for all ages in the afterschool program, which serves ages five to 15. The Council has since evolved its mission to better understand, develop, and utilize the collective voice of youth.

Staff recruit students for the afterschool program through avenues like referrals from family services, flyers, and a table set up at the entrance to Saratoga with promotional items and information. While the Saratoga afterschool and summer programming follows the NYC Department of Education calendar, students are welcome to join programming at any time. Students are then hand-picked for the Council based on their maturity, proven leadership, and

potential to be a positive influence on their peers. The principal goal of Saratoga is to support these children and their parents in their transition into permanent housing. Tomas, who is 13 and a former Youth Council President, and his family have done just that, and he often relays his firsthand experience of moving into permanent housing through video chats with his former fellow Council members and peers.

Youth Council members—there are currently eight—are encouraged to discuss their goals and are then placed on a developmental path to ensure progression toward those goals. This is possible because of a concerted effort across HFH. Chapman constantly relays information about students to staff members, so that they are aware when a donation or opportunity comes up that is pertinent to that student's needs.

Chrystel, 15, a student at Saratoga, has shown a proclivity for fashion and has been attending a modeling workshop in Manhattan. This was arranged by a staff member connected to the modeling agency who was aware of Chrystel's interests. For Alenell, 12, who is both skilled in and passionate about music, staff have better equipped her for her artistic endeavors by providing her with a keyboard instrument that was donated to the afterschool program. David, 13, who has proven to be an ardent public speaker, has been mentored by students from St. John's University, who have helped him hone his presentation skills. David was also part of a group that recently observed the power and social impact of having a collective voice. He and several Youth Council members attended a dinner event sponsored by ABIS (Advancement of Blacks in Sports), an organization founded to "seek equal rights and fair treatment of Black people by examining current institutional policies and practices in an effort to promote racial, social, and economic justice."

"The ABIS event showed what I could get to in public speaking," says David. "That I could [speak] in front of 100, 200, or even 300 people."

Chapman is working with the students to instill in them the sense that with their talents comes a level of responsibility and purpose. Older members of the Youth Council mentor the younger participants, who in turn practice these same leadership skills.

"[In the Youth Council], we discuss how to be a good leader in front of the kids," says Alenell. "They watch us in everything we do, so they will copy our self-control and respect."

Youth Council members are increasingly turning their attention to community building, which they practice by assisting in developing new programs and events for the afterschool program.

The Saratoga Financial Credit Union was recently created to teach financial literacy and promote leadership, kindness, and integrity. Youth earn "Rec Bucks" by demonstrating positive behaviors such as assisting a classmate, valuing other people's opinions, and illustrating a willingness to do what is best for everyone. With the earned currency, students can purchase games and toys from the "Rec Bucks" store, managed by Alenell.

According to Chapman, the credit union has also been teaching the students money management and budgeting skills and has been propelling Alenell to new levels of responsibility.

"It teaches Alenell, and those who help manage the store, different things in terms of management," Chapman explains. "She analyzes the product in the 'warehouse,' and when she sees a need for more product, she acts upon it."



Members of the Youth Council discuss new ideas and plan future projects.

Chrystel describes how new program ideas are born: “When we want to propose something new, first we talk together as youth, and then we talk to Mr. Chapman, and we decide all together.”

One such idea is the Student in Training (SIT) program, which stemmed from one student’s desire to help serve dinner to the students in the afterschool program. As more students volunteered, this blossomed into a two-month initiative where students learn leadership through service. It is an opportunity for them to learn entry-level food management, food delivery, and the elements of creating a positive atmosphere—all centered around serving food.

Since Saratoga’s afterschool program is not constrained by rigid curriculum, this freedom allows for more “skills-based learning,” where children gain valuable life experience through programs such as SIT.

“When students have a voice in shaping the activities their afterschool programs offer, their engagement can deepen as they gain important leadership, organizational, and collaboration skills,” says the Afterschool Alliance’s Grant.

The students in the Youth Council are leaders in conversations about Saratoga afterschool, even when it comes to funding for their new Teen Lounge. They conducted a presentation for longtime HFH collaborator KidCare, outlining their proposal for what the space should be: a place where students can relax and find happiness, whether through the room itself or with each other. They discussed how their dream Teen Lounge would incorporate a bit of everyone’s personal interests in the form of a multimedia room featuring gaming consoles, musical instruments, and arcade games.

KidCare Founder Jonathan Dorfman is looking forward to working with the Youth Council on a regular basis. “The kids showed a great amount of confidence during the presentation,” Dorfman says. “We are so impressed that they take it upon themselves to be leaders for their peers.”

The students focused on operational planning and budgeting for the Teen Lounge project. The numerous life skills they were able to



Youth Council members look out for the younger children in the afterschool program.

gain—from accountability to compromise—could not have come from a textbook or standard academic experience.

While the Youth Council is currently focused on programming, Chapman is starting to introduce Council members to deeper discussions about public policy. The perfect impetus for these conversations presented itself by way of the NYC mayoral election. Students presented to each other the advice they would offer candidates for New York City Mayor—from more housing to access to youth jobs and space for basketball, and Chapman went so far as to hold a faux press conference, where, acting as mayor, each fielded questions regarding their proposed policies.

Discussing public policy has offered students the opportunity to explore the nuances of life in a transitional residence. Thirteen-year-old Youth Council member Joshua has attributed his improved communication skills to living at Saratoga, since it is necessary to communicate with more people in his current community than if he lived elsewhere.

“I feel like this is just something to look back on when I eventually succeed,” says Joshua. “To look back on how I wasn’t in the best situation, but I was able to pull through and succeed.”

It is critical for the afterschool program to be a safe space—providing a place where youth experiencing homelessness can connect with peers who are in similar situations and facing some of the same emotions. This opportunity to share experiences and build relationships outside of school helps students develop communication skills, make friends more easily, become more cooperative, and fight less.<sup>1</sup>

Moving into the 2021–22 academic year, the Youth Council aims to expand their community building outside of Saratoga. They would ideally like to plan a “Youth Summit” for children at the three HFH family residences in the Bronx and eventually include other shelters for families with children in New York City. They plan to give a tutorial to other youth experiencing homelessness on how they can organize a space to grow individually and collectively in the form of their own Youth Councils.

Hannah Immerman, Senior Programs Associate at HFH, has high hopes for the expansion of the Youth Council to the Bronx HFH family residences.



Alenell organizes the store with a little help from a younger student and shows off the contents within.

1 Institute for Children and Poverty, Back to the Future: The Brownstone & FutureLink After-school Programs for Homeless Children, November 2001.

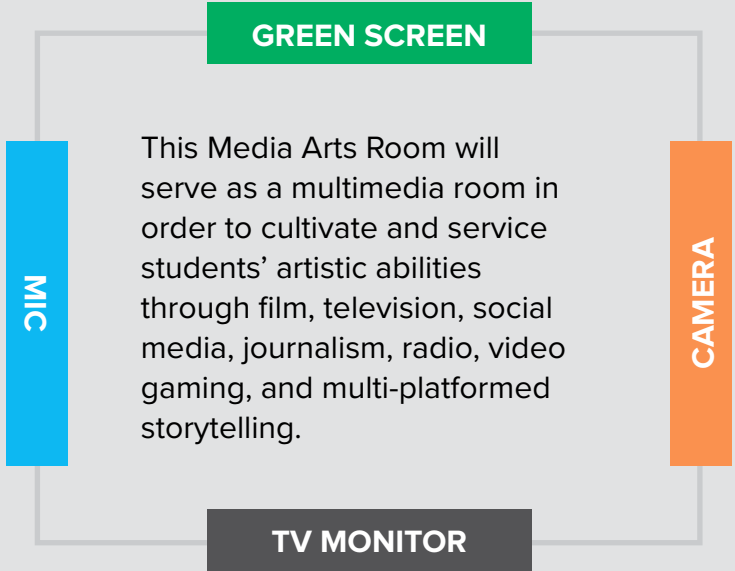
# Teen Lounge/ Media Arts Room

**Room Color**  
The entire room should be painted black

**Curtained Wall**  
The entire room should be lined with a blue or green screen curtain

**Lights**  
There should be overhead lights and rolling lights

**Control Room**  
There should be a live monitor, audio, and sound board that connects all appliances



**Properties**      **Appliances**



**ABOVE TOP:** The flowchart was part of a presentation the Youth Council created to showcase their vision for a Teen Lounge that includes a multi-media arts room.

**ABOVE BOTTOM:** Chapman and Immerman, in the future Teen Lounge and Media Arts Center, discuss the logistics of implementing the Youth Council's plan for the space.

“The Youth Council centers the youth as leaders and provides a platform for the participants to shape their afterschool program and connect with their peers in meaningful ways,” Immerman says. “Our goal is to replicate this model at our other HFH sites so that more youth can drive the development of their afterschool programs.”

David summed up the benefits of the Youth Council and the importance of representation.

“Overall, it’s good to have a voice as a youth, because most of the time, our community is based off adults’ behavior and how the adults are. It’s good that we can represent ourselves.”

Saratoga Family Residence was featured during the 2020 *Beyond Housing* conference. Chapman served on the “Putting Children First in Programming” panel alongside Sara Steward of Homefront, Inc. and Jaymes Sime, then of MICHA House, where they discussed the importance of providing access to robust programming for children—birth through college—while temporarily living in shelter. They explored programming options and funding to give kids, and their parents, access to quality pre-K, sports teams, on-site art therapy, and much more.

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## How to Connect:

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