The University-Community Partnership: Bringing people together through learning communities

RIT University/Community Partnerships, the City of Rochester’s David F. Gantt Community Center and the Anthony L. Jordan Health Center are organizational partners with the Bridges to Wellness/Puentes a la Salud project. As part of their efforts to support and propel this resident-led community health initiative, The “Building Healthy Communities through Photography” Learning Community provided an important venue for youth and adult residents to connect with RIT students in co-equal partnership. As both learners and educators, they shared their knowledge and experience. Utilizing the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) model as a framework, they discovered the community’s capacities and assets. The group focused on ways to use the photographic lens to develop personal and educational skills as well as provide a vehicle for youth voice. The Learning Community met at the Gantt Center and on the RIT campus to explore both environments and work on the project. The Learning Community participants were excited to showcase their work at the RIT Imagine Fest and at a special event for the David F. Gantt Community Center.
Bridges to Wellness/ Puentes a la Salud (BTW/PAS) is an initiative funded by the Greater Rochester Health Foundation and managed by the Anthony L. Jordan Health Center. Building upon the strengths and capacity of our community, Bridges to Wellness provides residents the support and resources necessary to make their vision of a healthy and safe community a reality. Working in an area of northeast Rochester bounded by Avenue D to the north, Portland Avenue to the east, Nash Street to the south, and Hudson Ave to the west, staff and residents work together to create change through four key strategies: improving public safety, providing opportunities for personal development, creating community pride and identity, and developing affordable modes of transportation. Approximately 20 residents gather once a month to discuss new initiatives at the BTW Resident Council Meeting. Smaller groups meet throughout the year to plan larger events, such as neighborhood clean-ups, after-school programs, family movie nights, and focus groups. Where there once were strangers, now there are bonds of friendship and neighbors working together to help each other.

Meet a few of our partners....

The learning community crew was fortunate to have the support of many strong community members.

Counterclockwise from left: David Gantt Community Center recreation leader Rocky Glessing shows off the youths’ work; Gantt Center Director Preston Sanders and Anthony Jordan Health Center Director of Marketing and Communications Meredith Rutherford catch up at the opening; Resident Coordinator Frank Hill enjoyed participating with the group; and RIT University-Community Partnership Director Ann Howard and Bridges to Wellness Resident Organizer and Youth Coordinator Jesse Knoth provided guidance on the project.
The Building Healthy Communities through Photography Learning Community made four trips to the Rochester Institute of Technology campus including a tour, a work day, the Imagine RIT festival, and a closure celebration. It was exciting for many of the youth to be on a university campus and to get a better understanding of college life. The tour highlighted the diverse range of opportunities available at the university. The working day on campus was especially significant in the life of the project as it gave participants the opportunity to use photo editing software to modify and experiment with their work. It was at this time that the youth chose which photographs they would display at Imagine RIT and in the art show at the Gantt Community Center. On the same day participants also had the opportunity to learn about and participate in a professional photo shoot directed by one of the RIT students in the group. The lesson included direction on lighting and shadows as well as the opportunity for the youth to use professional photo equipment.

Left: Former RIT student and community leader Jesse Knoth leads a tour of the RIT campus; youth take a look at the professional equipment in the RIT photo cage.
In order to get better acquainted with photography, the learning community involved many smaller projects along the way to the photo display. The first such activity was a scavenger hunt in and around the Gantt Center where teams of one youth and one RIT student were challenged to photograph concepts rather than specific places. A locked door illustrated a secret and a person in the rain showed cold. After participants gained some familiarity with the cameras subsequent classes focused on how to express one’s self through photography. The group took self portraits through painted window frames that displayed each person’s hidden talents and values.

In another class the group learned about alternative techniques of using and engaging with photography. Through an artistic technique known as gel transferring, the youth could print their photographs directly onto ceramic tiles.

Through several of the class activities, the youth had opportunities to learn about different outcomes of photography: they toured exhibits in student galleries at RIT and observed the use of photography in the study of geology in the Innovation Center. Then, back at the Gantt Center, the group had a great learning moment when the youth decided to put what they were learning about community and photography into action. While taking photos around the Center, it was noted that there was a lot of trash on the play areas. The youth decided not only to clean it up, but to also document the process. The resulting photos demonstrate the power of photography to be engaging and asset-building.
Sha’nasia Siplin

I am eleven years old. I’m in 5th grade at Flower Cty School #54. My favorite subject in school is math, because I like to solve problems such as square roots. My favorite hobby is drama, because I like to act like other people. My favorite color is purple. I like to get nice and new stuff.

Barry was my partner in this program. It was very fun to be in this kind of program with Barry. We took a lot of pictures of cool or interesting things or objects. One day we cleaned up the park with a lot of other kids. My pictures show people taking care of their community by picking up trash, and other assets in the community.

Gerrod Strickland

I am an eleven-year-old attending Flower City Park Elementary School. Every day after school I go to the David F. Gantt Community Center. The Center has great homework help and lots of fun stuff to do, like play air-hockey in the game room. The Building Community through Photography program has been a really cool experience and I have learned a lot. I now know how to operate a camera and take a good picture. After high school, I want to come to RIT and study photography.

My project is all about the Community center and why it is important to me. I get a lot of homework and Cindy helps me with it. I enjoy the programs at the center, and I like the sense of community that I find there.
Ruby Melendez

I am fourteen and go to John Marshall High School. Out of school I am always with my best friend (I love her) and if I’m not, I’m somewhere being a leader. I am a part of Youth Voice One Vision, Youth Engaged In Service, Girls Coalition, and am a Junior Recreation Leader for David F. Gantt Community Center. At the Gantt Center we have many different programs such as the great photography class. In that class we learned many things and it helped me get an understanding of professional photography.

My photos are all of things that I feel represent the David F. Gantt Community Center and all the small parts that make it what it is, such as Youth Voice One Vision and Girls Coalition.

Chaunessy Parks

I am fifteen years old and I go to Vanguard Collegiate High School. My best friend is Ruby and she rocks. Out of school I like to hang out at the David F. Gantt Center on North Street and hang out with my friends. I am also a part of Youth Engaged in Service and Girls Coalition. I wanted to do this photo class because I love taking pictures of myself and other people. Plus, I wanted to learn more about cameras.

My photos are all of things and people that I like. They are also pictures of things I thought were cool.
The area around Gantt was really dirty. It looked like the people in the community didn’t really care about Gantt. It didn’t look like a very safe place for kids to play. When I saw this mess I thought that I should clean it up with my friends. So I got them to help me because I know they like the park too and did not want to see it dirty. We all had fun and it looked great in the end.

The Zumba fitness class is a group that gathers up three days a week to exercise to keep their bodies healthy. There are a lot of people who like the Zumba group because they have a lot of fun when they participate. This is just one of many fitness classes that meet at Gantt.

I am fourteen years old. I attend John Marshall High School in the 9th grade. I love to dance, play sports, sing, have fun, and EAT! I can be very goofy sometimes, but I am always taking pictures. That’s why I like attending this class, because I just like taking pictures.
Meet the rest of the team....

**Harrison Co** is a first year student majoring in Imaging & Photographic Technology. As a practitioner of both the passionate art and the science of photography, he seeks to create great images as consistently as he can, and will take any opportunity to teach, to learn, and to be involved in the world of photography.

**Yulong Bao (Barry)** was born in China in 1990, and lived most of his life there. After graduation from high school in 2009, he came to the United States for college. He loves traveling and experiencing different cultures and languages. When he traveled in China with his first camera in 2009, he fell in love with photography. This was Barry’s first year in the photography program at RIT.

**Susanne Fili** is a student in the Professional Studies masters program, with concentration in Clinical Research Management and Health Systems Administrations. She earned her BS in Nutrition Management from RIT in May 2010. She is enrolled in Students and Services Americorps and while her focus is on nutrition education, she loves doing service work and has a secret passion for photography!

**Dan Justa** graduated in 2011 with a BS in Imaging and Photographic Technology. He has enjoyed his first learning community experience. Says Dan, “I have helped to teach photography to some of these kids, but they have helped to teach me about education and community. This is a great partnership that we have built, and I hope that it continues for many years.”

**Carry White** graduated in 2011 from the Public Policy program. Her focus was in sustainable development, and the spring marked her 5th learning community. She’s loved meeting people in the community through these projects and says, “Each one has been distinct, but this has been the most enthusiastic bunch.” She liked every minute of this class and hopes the youth stay involved in their community.

**Jane Amstey** Coordinator for RIT’s University/Community Partnership has been actively engaged in numerous efforts in Rochester, providing academic opportunities for RIT students to take what they’ve learned in the classroom and apply it to resident-led initiatives. Jane is committed to promoting positive youth development through direct service with youth. Her greatest joy is her two boys.

**Lisa Barker** is an RIT alum of ’08 with a degree in photojournalism. She participated in three learning communities as a student and has worked to coordinate several learning communities for the University-Community Partnership since graduating. She currently works in Rochester as a freelance photographer, writer, and event organizer.

**Jesse Knoth,** RIT Computer Science B.S. graduate (‘11), is the full-time Resident Organizer and Youth Coordinator for the Bridges to Wellness Project. He participated in a previous learning community as a student, which sparked his interest. Jesse is actively involved with his neighborhood as the President of the Barton Street Block Club and is the Secretary of the 19th Ward Community Association.

**Rocky Glessing** works at the Gantt Center as Recreation Leader, and has been working for the City of Rochester Recreation for 16 years. He enjoys working with youth and showing them new experiences like photography. He also wants to help provide opportunities for other non-traditional activities like volleyball, Frisbee, tennis, and other sports.

**Jamaal “Superstar” Fitzpatrick** is a senior at James Monroe High. He likes helping out in the community and playing sports. He also enjoys helping out at the Gantt Center and has been involved in learning communities for 4 years. He served as a youth leader for this learning community. He referees youth soccer and is aiming for a career in sports management.
Showcasing our work

At the 2011 Imagine RIT Festival, the Building Healthy Communities through Photography Learning Community was able to present their work to approximately 32,000 visitors. The group worked hard up until this point to create a display that would show off their photo projects in a fun and engaging way. The result was a dynamic, colorful booth that captured a sense of community: photos in rows hung with clothespins, interactive art projects for booth visitors to try, and even four-square and hopscotch boards to draw people into the booth. The photo show, created and presented by the youth, depicted many of the programs and activities featured at the David F Gantt Community Center including personal fitness classes, homework help, and a neighborhood cleanup organized by members of the learning community. Over the course of the day, the youth also had the chance to walk around the festival and take in some of the many interesting and informative exhibits around campus.

David F. Gantt Community Center Photo Show

At the conclusion of the Building Healthy Communities Through Photography project, a show of the group’s work was held at the David F Gantt Community Center. All of the youth were excited to share what they had been working on with their friends, families, neighbors, and community leaders. In addition to the group’s photos and art projects, a display featured the asset photos taken at Imagine RIT.
Learning about our Assets

The Community Assets Inventory was an important part of the learning community and central to both the Imagine RIT and Gantt Center photo shows. The team wanted a way to integrate the public into their exhibit. After some brainstorming it was decided that learning community members would ask visitors a question, “How are you an asset to your community?” and photograph them holding a chalkboard that showed their written response. Over 80 people participated, and the photos were displayed live during the exhibit. The photo slideshow was also played at the Gantt Center event. Visitors continued to contribute to the project by writing their own responses on a display board.

A sampling of the answers we gathered...

- We grow blueberries.
- I volunteer with kids at the JCC
- I am a youth leader
- I recycle
- I compost
- I am a teacher
- I help kids reach their dreams
- I am a dogwalker at Lollypop Farm
- I give back to those in need
- I’m building a local business
- Raising a Guiding Eyes puppy
- We Clean Sweep our neighborhood
- I’m a role model as a college student at MCC
- I volunteer with the Red Cross
- I’m going to engineer a better future
- I’m a Field to Table team leader
- I design custom camera equipment
- I help people communicate with radios.

Left to right: A group of youth look at the photo exhibit; Gantt Center’s Mickey Mendez contributes to the asset list; Gerrod shows off his work to Barb Zappia of the GRHF; City Council President Lovely Warren discusses the photography with Sha’nasia; Susanne Fili serves up healthy snacks to show attendees; and Gerrod and Tony Jordan of City Rec take a look at the group’s projects.
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