

Youth Art & Self-empowerment Project program description 2016

The Youth Art & Self-empowerment Project (YASP) empowers currently and formerly incarcerated young people through artistic expression, political education, and leadership development. YASP carries out this mission by providing space for young people currently and formerly incarcerated in adult jails to express their voices creatively, building platforms to amplify their voices, and helping them develop as leaders of their communities within and beyond the prison walls. We share young people's art and writing at public events and workshops throughout the region to increase awareness about the impacts of trying young people in the adult criminal justice system.

YASP facilitates weekly art, poetry, music and empowerment workshops for young people under 18 years old who are incarcerated pretrial in Philadelphia's adult jails. We continue to support and empower youth after they leave the jail system by establishing relationships with them that last beyond their incarceration and giving them leadership roles within the organization. These young people lead YASP workshops in schools and community centers around Philadelphia to engage other youth in critical conversations about how to break the cycle of the school-to-prison pipeline and build supports for themselves and their communities to end the cycle of mass incarceration. Each year, we offer workshops to about 100-150 incarcerated young people, and 400-500 young people outside of the prison system.

YASP currently has five part-time staff members, four of whom are young people who were held in Philadelphia's adult jails before they were 18 and participated in YASP workshops while incarcerated. Our staff includes a two-person Leadership Team, which functions as the organization's primary decision-makers and shapes YASP's day-to-day activities. The Leadership Team is comprised of one formerly incarcerated young woman who has been staff at YASP for four years and an adult ally who is one of the organization's co-founders and previously acted as the organization's interim director.

We believe YASP's youth services and leadership development model for formerly incarcerated young people, as well as young people who are at risk of incarceration, is innovative because many organizations offer services to young people, or provide them with resources, but few organizations put young people at the helm of creating those support systems for each other. YASP believes deeply in the power and ability of young people to empower themselves and create their own futures. Because of this, YASP's staff and leadership are comprised primarily of young men and women who first connected to our organization when they were incarcerated.

We will use RMYF funding to expand our ability to employ young people who have recently been released from incarceration, more fully compensate artists, poets and performers who facilitate our weekly workshops with youth in the Philadelphia Prison System, devote youth staff time to creating a new book club/discussion group for young people in the Philadelphia Prison System in partnership with Temple University's Inside-Out Prison Exchange program, expand our reentry supports for young people who have recently been released, and publish the writings and art of young people who are currently and formerly incarcerated.

All of the work funded through this grant will contribute to YASP's unique mission of empowering young people who have been through the adult criminal justice system to support and build community with other young people in that system. Together, young people in YASP fashion their own images of themselves and their futures that are not confined by the systems that seek to criminalize and disempower them. Providing space for young people to express themselves while incarcerated, supporting them upon their release, and empowering them as leaders of our work are all important steps in helping young people in YASP realize their full potential.