

Attic Youth Center

Innovation 2015

The Attic began offering Creative Action Groups (CAGs) in 2009 as part of its Life Skills Center programming to assist Attic youth, many of whom come from high risk environments, in developing essential life skills in the areas of career readiness, academic and educational enrichment, youth leadership, arts and culture, and health and wellness. CAGs are 12-week sessions of groups on unique topics chosen by youth at The Attic. CAGs are innovative in that they are based on a positive youth development model, are highly youth driven, and seek to engage youth as decision-makers and leaders while also supporting youth in developing valuable skills to use in their future careers and academic pursuits. The Attic, as an organization, is also unique and unduplicated because it serves only youth and is LGBTQ youth-focused. Other existing providers that serve youth are not youth focused, not LGBTQ focused, and/or do not offer a broad continuum of services that address the wide-ranging needs of LGBTQ youth. That Attic is often the referral source for other providers attempting to better support and assist LGBTQ identified youth in their systems.

The Attic is respectfully requesting a \$25,000 grant from RMYF to support its Creative Action Groups, a program of The Attic's Life Skills Center.

The Attic's Life Skills Center - specifically seeks to address the barriers that LGBTQ youth face using an integrated and multifaceted approach through individual, group and peer-led support. Currently, there are many challenges facing youth populations who are disconnected from education and employment systems, such as the LGBTQ youth population. Research indicates that support offered during out-of-school time that is grounded in youth development principals not only helps young people avoid destructive behaviors, but also enables them to acquire the academic and work-readiness skills and personal attributes that employers seek (Brown & Thakur, 2006). The Attic's Life Skills Center programming aims to assist LGBTQ youth in meeting their basic needs for safety, caring relationships, and connection to the larger community, while helping them build academic, vocational, personal and social skills.

The Attic's Life Skills Center serves LGBTQ youth and youth allies between the ages of 14 and 23. The Attic serves youth from the entire City of Philadelphia. The following characteristics describe the youth who come to The Attic: Ninety percent identify as LGBTQ and 10% are allies. The racial composition is 75% percent African-American, 11% Caucasian, 6% Latino/a, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4% multiracial and other ethnic groups. Gender representation is 58% male, 26% female, 9% male-to-female transgender, and 7% female-to-male transgender. At any given time, approximately 15% of youth served by The Attic are homeless, and 85% are low-income according to federal poverty guidelines.

Creative Action Groups - In 2009-2010, in an effort to continue to further develop The Attic's Life Skills Center programming, The Attic adapted the Project Based Learning model as the framework for Life Skills groups and renamed the model Creative Action Groups (CAGs). Project Based Learning is based on the principal that participants are more engaged in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks. Group facilitators organize learning around projects which are driven by challenging questions or problems and result in a presentation or product. Overall, The Attic uses Project Based Learning as part of Life Skills Center programming: 1) To provide engaging and appealing programming so that youth will come to The Attic often to participate in both groups and individualized support programs; and 2) To enable youth to be part of a team that delivers a product or presentation, thus providing real life experience that is useful for developing problem-solving skills that can be applied in job or educational settings.

CAGs begin with a topic area that serves as the focus for a curriculum. Life Skills staff facilitates CAGs, and in collaboration with youth, develop the plan for the CAG. The plan involves a youth-driven project idea that summarizes an issue, challenge, or problem. The group then selects a "driving" question, and plans activities to address the question. The group also decides on a final product or performance that demonstrates skills gained. Altogether, the objective is for the

CAG to inspire an investigative process that is goal directed, involves youth-directed knowledge acquisition and skill building, and culminates with a reflection/presentation on/of the acquired skills or knowledge. Project activities happen on an individual level, a group level, or both.

The Attic offers three 12-week cycles of CAGs throughout the school year. In each 12-week CAG cycle, there is least one CAG for each of the five Life Skills concentration areas (career readiness, academic and educational enrichment, youth leadership, arts and culture, and health and wellness). The interests of youth participants determine the CAG focus areas. Recent CAG topics include: cooking, acting, journalism, fashion design, mindfulness meditation, printmaking, videography, screen writing, poetry, yoga, and social action. During the last week, Attic staff conducts youth surveys to determine the topics for the next session of CAGs.

Last year, The Attic started a new CAG specifically for high school students called WERQ (Work and Education Readiness for Queer Youth). This CAG is set up as an internship in which 25 high school aged youth participate in the CAG for 5 hours a week and use project-based learning to work on a project to educate teachers on ways in which they can incorporate LGBTQ issues into classroom curricula. The students who participate in this specific CAG are selected through an interview process, and receive a stipend for their participation. The Attic will continue the WERQ CAG during the 2014-2015 school year.

The Attic also makes a focused effort to integrate technology into CAG programming. The Attic has twelve laptop computers specifically for youth to use while they are at The Attic. CAG facilitators sign computers out for youth to use during CAG sessions. Youth use computers as part of CAGs for designing newsletters and editing photographs, for designing blogs and producing and editing videos, and for creating and presenting PowerPoint presentations during CAG sessions.

Weekly Schedule - During the 2014-2015 school year, The Attic will offer two CAG sessions each day from Monday through Thursday, with each session consisting of three different CAG options. For example, session one, from 4:00-5:15 on Monday and Wednesday, will offer youth the choice of attending a mural arts CAG, a public speaking CAG, or a healthy cooking CAG. Session two, from 5:30-6:45 on Monday and Wednesday, will offer youth the choice of attending a yoga CAG, a photography CAG, or a Greek mythology CAG. The Attic serves a meal between the two CAG sessions. Fridays at The Attic include additional Life Skills Center activities, such as opportunities to participate in support groups or one-on-one life coaching; partake in special activities such as planning community events such as the AIDS Walk or Pride; or attend monthly special events such as holiday parties, open mic, or movie nights.

The Attic will use funding to support CAG programming as follows: to hire part-time CAG facilitators who are experts in their fields and who have experience working with youth; to support the salary of The Attic's full-time Life Skills Program Coordinator who oversees CAGs; and to purchase supplies and software to enhance CAG programming. Funding would allow The Attic to increase the number of opportunities available for Philadelphia's LGBTQ youth to learn an integrated array of skills through innovative programming that is geared towards their interests. CAGs, in conjunction with the other services at The Attic, offer a space where youth can not only feel safe and accepted and learn new skills, but where they are also considered advocates, social change agents and leaders in making the community better for all. Through CAG programming, The Attic empowers youth who on a daily basis may feel disempowered within the various systems in which they navigate. CAGs also focus on building resiliency among LGBTQ youth and providing them with the tools they need to become independent, thriving members of the community, while at the same time encouraging youth to explore their interests, find their voice, and advocate for themselves and their peers.