

islesWorks

the newsletter of Isles, Inc. • Spring 2016

Celebrating **35** years



More Than 65 Gardens & Growing! p.4



Reclaiming Green Spaces for Play p.6



Isles Builds Wealth p. 10



IYI's 20th Graduation p.9

MESSAGE

from Isles' President

Dear Friends,

As we head into Isles' 35th year, I think a lot about time, and the importance of persevering.

This newsletter offers a glimpse into work that could only have evolved over many years. You see, we've been asking a basic question, "What are the most powerful ways to meet our mission of more self-reliant families and healthy, sustainable communities?"

The answer to that, at least for us, is reflected in this newsletter. But while "sticking around" is important, it's not enough. Good organizations learn over time, think big, and take risks.

How do we maintain this entrepreneurial team, and spirit? It starts with great people who commit to an audacious mission, and engage as entrepreneurs. And we persevere. But there's more to it than that. Since I started teaching Social Entrepreneurship at Princeton University this year, we've begun writing a history of Isles to answer that question.

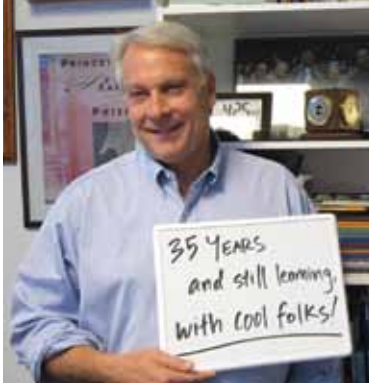
A few benchmarks are worth noting. We now understand the threat of lead poisoning and how to affordably clean up homes, often the most dangerous places for children. The debacle in Flint, Michigan highlights what we've been saying for ten years: the permanent damage to thousands of lead poisoned kids annually is preventable. We have made 170 homes lead-safe and energy efficient over the past few years, at a cost of less than \$7,000 per home. It's time to scale that up, here and across the country.

After a lengthy post-recession delay, and more fundraising, we are moving forward with the Social Profit Center at Mill One. A challenge donation from long time friends Paul and Anke Volcker, and the many individuals that stepped up to match their challenge, made it possible.

To achieve this innovative work, we relied on 300 diverse institutional and 1,000 individual donors this year. You really matter!

Join the good work, and let us know what you think.

*In community,
Marty*



Sam Hamill

In the 1980s, as director of the nonprofit Middlesex Somerset Mercer Regional Council, Sam Hamill brought a strong regional perspective to central New Jersey planning, and a belief that Trenton was key to the region. This led naturally to an early association with Isles, also a fledgling nonprofit in 1981.

In 1998, Sam co-chaired Isles' first capital campaign of more than \$3.5 million, raising the visibility of Isles' work. Sam then served as an Isles Trustee from 2001 to 2003. Since that time, he has been a steadfast advisor, donor, volunteer, and most importantly, friend. "Cities like Trenton," says Sam, "need strong regional connections as well as the community-based development work Isles excels in."



In the spring of 2014, Sam was at Galilee Baptist Church for the funeral of a young man, gunned down by a Trenton gang. Shots rang out during the service, shattering stained glass windows.

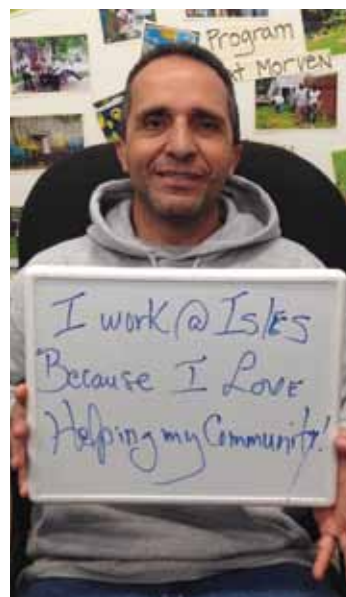
This was a stark reminder of the challenges facing today's youth, the demoralizing effect of violence on residents, and how public perception of a violent city undermines its future prospects.

At the same time, Isles was developing a pioneering effort to counter violence through Isles Youth Institute, community planning, and "safe havens," such as gardens, parks, and reclaimed vacant lots.

Isles and Sam joined forces to involve leaders across the region to reduce violence in Trenton. Sam notes, "Someday, tax policy and other governmental burdens that cripple New Jersey cities may change for the better. For now, Isles' effective work in communities and its bridge building beyond the city boundaries is leading the way."

We feel lucky to have Sam's friendship and support.

isles People



**Thank you
for supporting
Isles!**

These are just a few
of the reasons your
gifts are important.

See more at
facebook.com/islesinc.



LIVE healthy

A community garden in Trenton

TRENTON GROWS, the World Knows

With nearly 70 community and school gardens in the region and 35 years under our belts, Isles has learned a lot about urban gardening. Increasingly, we're sharing these lessons with others.



In 2011, Isles raised funds and sponsored the first statewide conference on urban agriculture, "Ag in the City." Over 100 municipal officials, community leaders, urban farmers and gardeners, planners, academics, entrepreneurs, public health professionals, and others met to share knowledge, research, and advocacy.

Four years later, Isles funded and worked alongside key leaders around the state to organize the second Ag in the City conference. The 2015 "Garden Cities" brought over 200 participants and featured keynote speakers from Detroit and New York City.

Moving forward, Laura Lawson, Dean of the newly created Office of Agriculture and Urban Programs at Rutgers, has agreed to organize a biannual conference in partnership with Isles and others. Thanks, Laura!

Grassroots work improves with a birds-eye view!

"The day I called Isles..."

changed our family's life. When Baptista Little asked about our home repair services, her call was just one of many that Isles fields every day. That is, until Prince Moore, who supervises our healthy home and energy retrofit service, visited the Littles' home for an inspection.

Prince found a family with two small children under age seven, a baby on the way, a house full of environmental toxins, and the structure falling down around them. The Littles' roof was leaking badly, asbestos was falling off the heating pipes, and the windows were lined with peeling lead paint. A 1910 vintage coal-fired heater, since converted to oil, had stopped working mid-winter of last year. And a broken water pipe had weakened the floors so badly that the upstairs bathtub was threatening to fall through the ceiling, into the living room. The Littles, like so many others, just couldn't afford to repair their home.

To quote Baptista, "There was so much work that needed to be done, we couldn't believe that [Isles] would fix it all!" Isles specializes

The Little family



in fixing homes that threaten children's health and waste energy. And by training and hiring local contractors, we're strengthening the local economy at the same time. Within two weeks, the Littles had a new roof and heating system, lead safe windows, and a reinforced floor that will ensure the bathtub remains safely upstairs.

A house that could have been condemned became a safe, energy-efficient, and healthy home for the Little children.



Isles has provided this type of lead safe, energy efficiency, and healthy homes rehab service for more than 170 Trenton homeowners over the past four years, offering a model for cost-effective solutions to lead-filled homes that plague older cities.

"Thankful is not the word," wrote Baptista, "this family will be forever grateful to Isles."

And Isles is forever grateful to the donors and funders who make this work possible.



Isles' Elyse Pivnick at a State House press conference

Starting to Light the Way

By starting community gardens back in 1981, Isles learned to test and clean up lead in the soil. Later, Isles worked with local residents to clean up contaminated "brownfield" sites. In 1999, Isles began researching the impact of environmental toxins on communities, especially on young kids' health. Gradually it became clear—the most dangerous place for kids was often their own homes, because of the lead in the dust in those homes.

Since then, we tested over 2,000 homes and analyzed health data. But we didn't stop there. We developed low cost ways to make homes both healthy and energy-efficient. Then we trained and hired contractors to retrofit homes, and we trained home health workers to be healthy home assessors and "coaches."

"There are very few public health interventions that offer that great combination of short-term benefits, as well as long-term gains. Lead abatement is one," says Professor Matthew Davis, Chief Medical Executive, State of Michigan.

On February 1, Isles joined the Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey, New Jersey Citizen Action, and other community leaders at a State House press conference to urge Governor Christie to restore \$10 million to the Lead Hazard Control Assistance Fund (LHCAF). Elyse Pivnick, Isles Director of Environmental Health, offered surprising data to New Jersey leaders. "In NJ, the primary source of lead poisoning is chipping and peeling lead paint, not water. Among children tested in 2014, a higher percentage have elevated blood lead levels (EBLL) in 13 NJ communities than in Flint, Michigan. Over 3,000 NJ children were identified with EBLLs for the first time in 2015."

That headline, "13 communities have a higher percentage of children with lead poisoning than Flint," was picked up around the country, even sparking a companion report in Pennsylvania and other states. From Mother Jones to the Washington Post, to NBC 10 and even a French news outlet, the public wants to know why the problem is not yet solved.

Of course, the LHCAF should be funded, but we want to restructure it to make the biggest impact. New Jersey can also learn from other states with better building codes, testing for kids, and other prevention strategies.

It's about time.

Isles creates powerful, low-cost ways to make homes safe for kids. Diverse donors and funders make this possible!



REVITALIZE communities

Cleaning up a vacant lot

Reclaiming Green Spaces

Research shows that when we create safe places for kids to play outdoors, crime goes down. Recreation is especially important in early childhood, when young minds develop the capacity for decision making and planning skills. Vigorous play also boosts brain activity and contributes to better academic achievement. Unfortunately, kids have few places for unstructured, safe play in Trenton. In

response, Isles helps local residents reclaim underused spaces for play, similar to our community gardening efforts.

Isles Clean & Green works with city government to identify vacant lots and deteriorating public parks and “clean & green” them. Isles crews remove litter and clean up dumping, trim grass, bushes and tree limbs, and beautify spaces with new plantings. The Clean & Green crew raises standards for the entire neighborhood, collaborating with residents and civic associations to better maintain properties in their neighborhoods.

In addition, Isles’ new mobile recreation unit, ‘T-Recs,’ recently hit the streets. T-Recs energizes the reclaimed spaces with games, sports equipment, and fun activities for all ages. As city government shrinks, these low-cost services rejuvenate existing city parks and neighborhood greenways, creating safe, inviting environments for community fun and peace. Together, these efforts help to improve perceptions of Trenton neighborhoods and reduce crime.



Trenton Arts in Focus

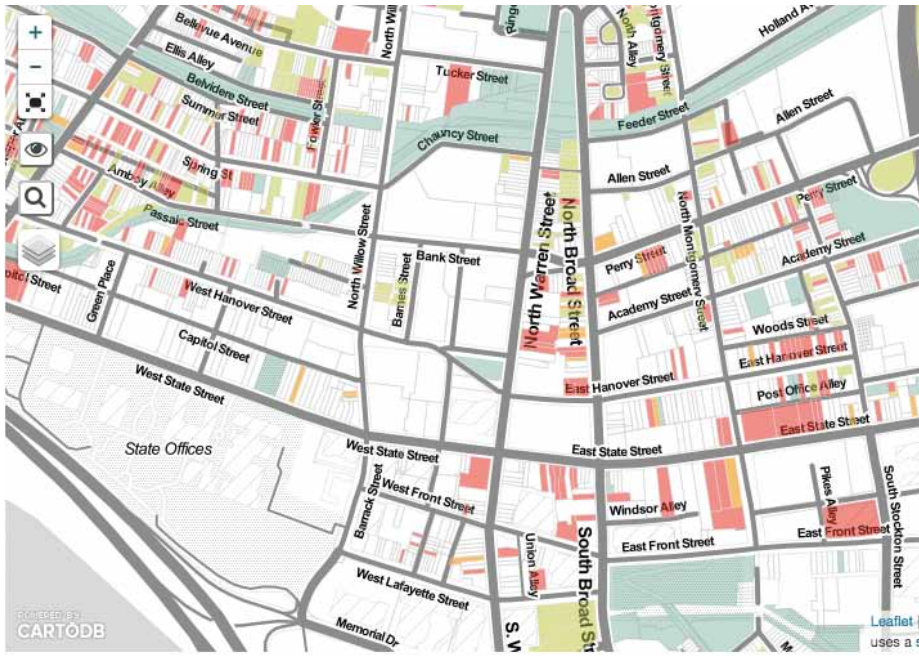
Over the past few years, an influx of artists and art-related activities has brought energy to the Old Trenton Neighborhood (OTN). At the same time, the City of Trenton’s new master plan, Trenton250, is defining a vision for the city as a premier economic and cultural center built on arts, industry, and education.

Isles, in partnership with Passage Theatre, secured support from the National Endowment for the Arts and NJ Neighborhood Revitalization Tax Credit funding to develop OTN as Trenton’s first arts and culture district. What began as a neighborhood-focused process is now *Trenton Arts in Focus*, a city-wide planning effort to link to the master plan and strengthen existing arts and culture assets while attracting new people, businesses, and visitors.

Facilitated by Isles, a steering committee of 30 artists and arts-related groups is overseeing the process, generating input from nearly 500 stakeholders. The plan will be finalized in Spring 2016, and will guide future development of OTN while expanding arts and culture across the city.



Arts planning participants



Vacant Property Map Key



Restoring Trenton: *What's Next?*

In 2014, Isles led Trenton's first city-wide vacant property survey and launched www.restoringtrenton.org to make the data publicly accessible. Isles continues to manage the website, and it is now a valuable tool for residents, developers, local government, and researchers to target strategies to reduce vacant properties and redevelop the city.

- Since then, the City of Trenton has revamped and enforced its Vacant Property Registration Ordinance, requiring owners of vacant properties to pay an annual fee ranging from \$250 to \$1,000. With the help of the survey and resulting data, the City has collected registration fees that fund much needed investments by the City to solve the vacancy problem, such as upgrading database technology, educating owners of obligations, and enhancing capacity to locate missing owners.
- In 2015, New Jersey Community Capital, Isles, the Center for Community Progress, and Rutgers University prepared and released *Laying the Foundations for Strong Neighborhoods*, a city-wide housing conditions market study. The study addressed homeownership rates, violent crime, and tax delinquency to help analyze the conditions in Trenton's neighborhoods and explore strategic options for the City and other stakeholders. The results of this study can be viewed at www.restoringtrenton.org.

In 2016 we will:

- Facilitate citizen reporting of vacancies in their neighborhood on behalf of the City of Trenton.
- Help the City implement the Abandoned Properties Rehabilitation Act to more efficiently acquire abandoned properties, clear liens, and then rehab, demolish, and/or resell them to new owners.

Historic Homes Back to Life

The renovation of 11 vacant buildings in the Old Trenton Neighborhood (OTN) is bringing back 24 beautiful homes and two retail spaces. The Stockton Street Apartments (SSA) offer modern layouts and increased safety and comfort, while still preserving the historic character of the buildings.

The two retail units will add vibrancy to the street and recreate neighborhood-scale commercial activity that once thrived in the OTN. The SSA also models sustainable design. It uses minimal and recycled waste, durable, low toxicity materials with high recycled content, and energy efficiency features.

Isles' ability to create healthy, sustainable places relies on diverse funders. Join us!



Stockton Street Apartments

Want an update on Isles' small grants competition, launched in 2014?

Visit www.isles.org to learn more!



EDUCATE and train

Isles' Andre Thomas trains community health workers.

Isles CEET: *Training Others to See*

Healthy homes make for healthy people. In Trenton and other older cities, the most dangerous place for children is in their home. More than 85% of Trenton homes were built before 1980, 51% were built before 1939, and 30% are substandard. Older homes foster dangers both seen and unseen—like mold, moisture, trip/fall hazards, bed bugs, lead paint, and more.

To counter this threat, Isles trains home visitors—building inspectors, social workers, health workers and weatherization professionals—as Community Health Workers. Isles has trained or certified more than 900 “Community Health Workers” over the past 2 years. Trainees now perform their primary jobs and, at the same time, find home health dangers like moisture, pests, harsh cleaning products, or even room fresheners that can send an asthmatic child to the emergency room. We help other home visiting organizations provide more tools to homeowners to keep their children safe and healthy. Natalie, a visiting health worker, describes her experience with one family:

“After receiving the initial training, [I began to] look a different way

when entering each family’s home and think about how I can educate and assist the families we serve. When it was warm, we spoke about the cats bringing fleas into the home. Recently, the same mother shared with me that her pediatrician contacted her and said her son’s lead level was high. I asked mom if the home has ever been tested for lead. The mother replied “no.” I was so excited to share with the mother that not only can the home be tested for lead, but a healthy homes assessment can be completed.”

Sometimes just a little knowledge and a new way of “seeing,” can make all the difference.

She continues, “Another family uses very fragrant cleansers to clean the home [even though] members of the family have asthma. Sharing information about green and thrifty cleaning products would be useful for that family. Another family smokes around a toddler that has asthma, and I will be sharing asthma and allergies information with them.”

To learn more or sign up for training, visit www.isles.org/services/green-jobs/training-schedule

Isles Youth Institute: *Overcoming Obstacles*

By the time Marie got to high school, she had lost most of her motivation. Getting into verbal and physical fights with other students, she disengaged. Finally, Marie and her single parent mother decided that, like her older brother, she would apply to Isles Youth Institute.

Nearly half of Trenton public school students drop out, like Marie. Many are involved with the juvenile justice system. Some have children, some lack a home, and others simply drop out because traditional schools don’t work for them.

IYI offers an alternative path, offering self-reliance through education. Our teachers and coaches help students work through life challenges while helping them achieve their educational and career goals. Donors and grant funds make this approach possible.

When asked how IYI made a difference for her, Marie answered, “Smaller classes! I feel like I learn better here because of that.”

Marie is now a sixteen-year-old student at Isles Youth Institute with perfect attendance. She is eager to learn, and she takes opportunities to volunteer and participate in afterschool activities. As president of IYI’s student government, she is an excellent role model for her peers.

After renovating the City Hall Atrium Garden with her classmates, Marie hosted its unveiling, giving a warm welcome to the audience, including Mayor Jackson, and introducing Marty Johnson.

Later, Marie attended the Mayor's State of the City Address, where she learned about the workings of local government, and she participated in Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School Service Auction to help raise money for Isles.

Marie recently began taking CNA classes. "I am grateful for the opportunity to take CNA classes. They give me a lot of information about a career field that I knew nothing about. I can't wait to be able to explore other careers so that I can see which career choice is best for me."

**Want to get involved in this youth movement?
Call us at 609.341.4751.**



Students at City Hall Atrium Unveiling

Isles Youth Institute Turns 20

Back in 1994, David Styner had a problem. As Isles Construction Manager, he was renovating vacant homes across the city, and young adults kept coming to the construction site, looking for work. From time to time, he would give them the chance to show their skills. Unfortunately, too many of them, no matter how good their carpentry skills, lacked a high school education. David wondered, "Wouldn't it be great if we could combine construction training with a high school education—at the same time?"

That question led Isles to develop YouthBuild, now called Isles Youth Institute (IYI). In June 2015, we celebrated 20 years of educating, training, and supporting disconnected youth in the Trenton region. More than 80 kids who had left school turned to IYI last year to help them gain high school diplomas, job skills, employment, and access to higher education.

Students also perform community development work. In 2015, they helped restore Cadwalader Park, the D&R Greenway, Reading Senior Center, and the Trenton City Hall Atrium. In addition, students also gained job placements with Kohl's, the Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission, Target, Macy's, Bed Bath and Beyond, Burlington Coat Factory, The College of New Jersey Bonner Center, and more.

Over the years, more than 1,000 students have benefited from this powerful education and training. This is only possible when diverse donors believe every young person deserves an education and a chance.

Recently, Shenette Gray joined Isles' staff as Director of IYI. Ms. Gray was the past Principal of the Daylight Twilight

High School of Trenton, where she increased attendance, graduation rates, and other core outcomes. Prior to that role, Ms. Gray worked as Principal of Newark Bridges High School, and School Leader of Capital Prep Charter High School in Trenton. She graduated from Hampton University with a degree in Accounting and the University of Maryland, where she earned an MBA. She also completed the Harvard University Urban School Leadership Institute Program.

David Styner passed away before the first YouthBuild class graduated back in 1995. We think he watches over IYI today with deep pride in what he helped start.



With Thanks
and Appreciation
from the
Class of 2015!



One Family's Story

After two years of budgeting, improving their credit, and participating in matched savings, Trentonians Lawrence and Sharon Foreman purchased their dream home. In August, they moved in to a sturdy Dutch Colonial in the Wilbur section of Trenton.

Homeownership is an important way to build wealth and strengthen families, but not always. Too often, first time homebuyers lack a clear and realistic plan for saving, spending, and earning. Many wind up exhausting any accumulated assets in order to meet everyday expenses. Debt builds up on credit cards; then equity is tapped or mortgages are refinanced to cover the escalating and unmanageable costs.

It's a story we hear all too often, but with Isles Financial Solutions (IFS), we are doing something about it. We help families like the Foremans succeed at homeownership and maintain independence. IFS works with employers and their lower-wage employees to bring an integrated blend of proven behavior change methods, loans, and financial services to build the financial capability of families.

IFS helps workers create and manage budgets, set financial goals, save for the future, and develop positive financial habits. In 2015, we served 249 customers with financial workshops and 1:1 counseling services, and made ten loans totaling \$14,557. In addition, we helped four customers purchase their first home.

Lawrence and Sharon took the IFS lessons to heart. For starters, they chose a well-maintained home that was affordable for them. Since moving in six months ago, the couple has been careful to resist the kind of outsized spending that sets so many new homeowners down a difficult path.

"We're doing the same things we were doing before the house"—saving in the bank, paying off any credit card balances, and making wise purchase decisions. "The house is solid. Everything's really working out great." The Foremans exemplify how Isles' work, with the support of investors like you, fosters self reliance.



Lawrence Foreman outside his new home



Housing Matters

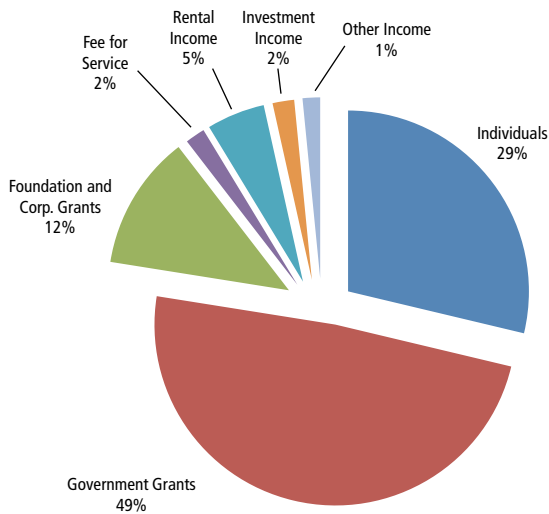
In 2008, the recession dried up \$19 trillion in total wealth. With home prices tanking, reports estimated a loss of \$7 trillion in the real estate industry alone. Lower income homeowners were hit hard. Many were sold an "American Dream" that was far beyond their reach, and offered through scam mortgages.

The impact of the recession—especially for lower income homeowners—is still with us. With more than 300 pages of Sheriff (foreclosure) Sales scheduled for Mercer County properties alone, families and neighborhoods face continued, deep challenges.

Over the past 7 years, our donors and funders have enabled Isles to work with more than 700 families to avoid foreclosure. Isles offers one-on-one counseling, helping homeowners assess their current financial/mortgage loan and credit status, evaluate the best way to preserve assets, and negotiate with the servicing agent or lender on behalf of the homeowner. Isles counselors put people back on their feet. As one customer put it,

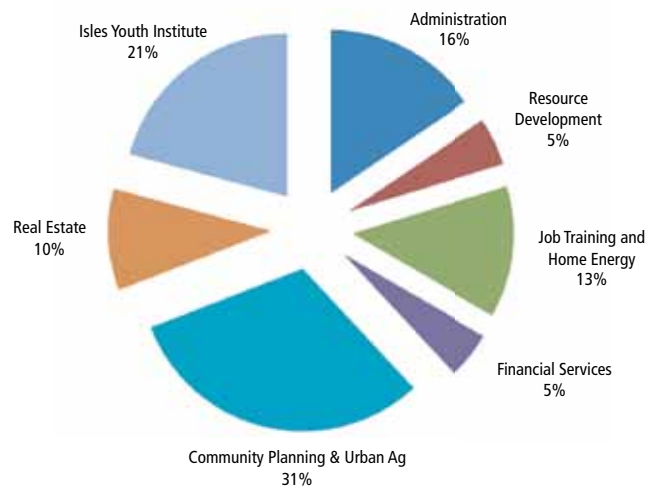
"I would like to thank you for all the work you put in helping me get my modification. Isles is truly a blessing to our community."

2015 ACTUAL REVENUE



Total: \$7,060,576

2015 ACTUAL EXPENSES



Total: \$6,893,448

A complete audited financial statement will be available at our office or at isles.org/about/publications/financials

The Social Profit Center at Mill One

is converting a large, historic factory into a center for nonprofits and related for-profit businesses and artists. In the past year, we've focused on retrofitting the core and shell of Mill One. We are restoring historic windows, and installing a new green and solar roof as this newsletter goes to print. The Social Profit Center is about 1/3 leased and currently houses Isles training and nonprofit tenants involved in literacy, job training, recycling, and the arts.

It is exciting to see the final product unfolding, creating dramatically beautiful spaces.

Interested in joining us?

Contact David at dschraye@isles.org



Volcker Challenge

In 2015, Paul and Anke Volcker established a \$1 million challenge grant to support the development of the Social Profit Center at Mill One. Thank you to the following donors who have helped match these funds in 2015.

Ben and Anna Bernanke
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giving 2015

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Isabella de la Houssaye and David Crane of Lawrenceville hosted the spring 2015 Isles Bridge Builder Celebration. Shown here are Stacy Heading, IYI students Shawn Hardee and Meya Brown, Marty Johnson, and Isabella de la Houssaye.

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Tribute to Pat Donohue

You can tell a lot about a guy by playing basketball with him. It was many years ago, but I really met Pat Donohue on a hoops court. He was fearless. With his small, 5'7" frame, he would take it right at the big guys underneath. And he was talented. From the first game, I wanted him on my team!

Pat brought those attributes to life. He jumped in the mix, took risks, and didn't back down, even when he lacked the "size" of his competitors. Lucky for us, his teammates, Pat took good care of us. He was always there for the team, always positive.

Pat was a former trustee and board chair at Isles, before he became assistant provost at The College of New Jersey. There, he developed the Bonner Institute for Civic and Community Engagement, the Sustainability Institute, and the Institute for Prison Teaching and Outreach. He also oversaw the Bonner VISTA Fellows program, the National and State AmeriCorps programs, the TrentonWorks Initiative, and the Trenton Prevention Policy Board initiative.

The day Pat died, he and I discussed the positive gains of his 9 years at the college. For a few months, we'd been exploring, with others, ways to bring his campus-community lessons to a larger regional scale. This time, we'd do it from a more community-grounded perspective.

But we also discussed hard stuff—why institutions resist change and how painful and lonely it can be when you put yourself out there, trying to make change happen. His work fundamentally altered the way we think about how colleges and communities can mutually benefit from each other.

We miss him.

—Marty