Sesworks

the newsletter of Isles, Inc.

spring 2013



Learning by Serving at YouthBuild

Isles YouthBuild Institute (IYI) develops student academic, vocational, and life skills. This includes fostering citizenship, compassion, patience, integrity, and a strong sense of self. We are lucky to witness IYI students blossom into remarkable young adults.

Service learning develops character and other life skills by actively engaging in and meeting the needs of the community. This takes on many interesting forms, such as visiting the elderly, tutoring children, building community gardens, and painting a community center. Over the past year, IYI students traveled to help victims of Hurricane Sandy; painted murals in their neighborhoods; worked at a local Head Start Center; helped students with disabilities at Visitation Home; and tutored students at the Hedgepeth Williams school. IYI students develop a sense of their abilities by serving others, and the community is proud of their contributions.

Hats off to IYI staff, Esther Brahmi and Stacy Heading, who plan the activities and support students as they build community and themselves.



On MLK Jr. Day of Service, IYI students helped people clean up and recover from Hurricane Sandy. On Pelican Island, near Toms River, YouthBuild students helped a thankful homeowner clean her backyard. She had just returned to her home the week the students arrived.



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MESSAGE from Isles' President

A memorial I attended this past January, on Martin Luther King's Birthday, struck a chord and stayed with me long beyond the event. First, young people were honored and given the chance to speak about their painful and hopeful journey from the streets and prison to community. Speakers urged us to pursue our own growth, discipline, and self-reliance. Columnist L.A. Parker and Bishop Joseph Ravenell reminded us that this pursuit is not a lone activity—it requires us to nurture community, and love and care about others, not just self.



But, I was most challenged by Rev. Toby Sanders' reminder of the "fierce urgency of now." One year before he was killed, Dr. King was struggling with time, as perhaps we all should be. He said,

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and

history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time."

For 32 years, we at Isles have grappled with this question: How much time do we have before it is too late? If we are too urgent, might that seem like weakness?

These are not just philosophical questions. For example, many scientists think we have reached the greenhouse gas tipping point on climate change. In Trenton and other cities, an entire generation of young people are falling behind. And of course, the list goes on.

The good news is that we do learn over time. But Dr. King was right—let the urgency of the moment focus our mind enough to act. So, when we ask you to support Isles, don't wait for some future light to go on. The "fierce urgency" is now.

> In Community, Marty

Meet Christine Grele, VISTA Volunteer



Over the years, Isles has benefited from the service of AmeriCorps VISTAs (Volunteer In Service To America), VISTA members serve full-time for a year at a nonprofit organization, to support ways to bring individuals and communities out of poverty. Most stay for a year, but occasionally they stay longer and become permanent Isles staff. That was the case with Peter and Lisa Kasabach. and others.

This year's VISTA volunteer, Christine Grele, hails from Vermont where she taught college art and was active in her community for many years. Prior to teaching, Christine managed a Head Start program, and coordinated weekend programming at a lowresidency college. When asked why she chose Isles for her VISTA placement, she replied, "I was looking for a change, and wanted to be in an urban setting, and I was drawn to Isles' comprehensive approach to building sustainable community."

Though Christine has been in Vermont for several years, she is originally from Highland Park, NJ, so the transition

in the NEWS

James Rolling and and his wife Louise seen at Isles 30th Anniversary Gala.

James Rolling, 1924–2013, Community Leader and Former Isles Trustee

In 1991, James and Louise Rolling contacted Isles to talk about creating a community garden near their home on Dunham Street in Trenton's west ward. As community leaders, James and his wife Louise had lived in the shadows of a crumbling and contaminated factory building for many years. They felt that their neighborhood deserved clean, green space, and they were determined to make that happen. What became clear early on was that the Rollings had a bigger goal—and the capacity to achieve it: the demolition, cleanup, and redevelopment of the former Magic Marker site. What started as a small greening project quickly grew into a major project for Trenton, and Isles was proud to work alongside them to get the old factory and grounds cleaned up. It was a lengthy process, and included two years of growing mustard plants that absorbed toxic lead from the soil. Even more remarkable, the Rollings decided that the neighbors needed to understand the contamination issues, and so they worked with Isles and Rutgers professors to create a course that they and their neighbors participated in.

Today, the results are there for all to see. James was a strong, yet gentle force, a respected leader alongside Louise, his wife of 65 years. They fundamentally altered the trajectory of their community by their incredible work, organizing, and courage. We will always be grateful for the leadership that James and Louise provided. We will miss James, and his leadership, but we will never forget what he taught us and what he did for our community. We still stand on his broad shoulders.

from Vermont to New Jersey has been easy. She has settled nicely into her Communications and Volunteer Management position. Her work increases awareness of Isles and the use of skillsbased volunteers through networking, building partnerships, and utilizing social media tools. She developed recruiting, training, and tracking systems for volunteer management at Isles, and she performs other functions in the Resource Development office. Right now, she is driving the Miles for Isles 5K race and 1-mile walk at Mercer County Park on May 4. This is the second year of the race, and we plan to double participation. Visit www.milesforisles.org to learn about it. With her background in education, she enjoys collaborating with YouthBuild staff to help promote the services at the school. Christine states, "I really like that while I am learning about managing an established non-profit, I can use my art and education knowledge in new ways." Christine's work is much appreciated at Isles.

According to Yuki Moore Laurenti, Managing Director for Resource Development,

"Christine has greatly increased our capacity. We have come to rely on her expertise and great energy!"



Marty Johnson received the "Community Leader of the Year" award from the Princeton Chamber of Commerce. Marty pictured with other awardees.

green and healthy



Bellevue Street House

The Most **Dangerous Place?** It may be in your home.

Fourteen years ago, Isles began looking at the impact of contaminated brownfield sites on nearby youth and residents. While brownfields can be a health menace, experts helped us understand that, since we spend about 90% of our time indoors (mostly in our homes) our homes may pose the greatest threat. As we explored further and began testing homes for lead and other hazards, it became clear that the old age and poor condition of Trenton homes can threaten the health of those inside them, especially children.

The three biggest threats, (lead in the dust, mold, and pests) trigger lead poisoning, asthma, and other illnesses. The cost of these ailments in medical care, missed school and work time, reduced IQ, and more, are little understood. Other threats like radon, injuries by falls, and poisons also take their toll. These costs add to the many stresses of daily life, and for

the most part, they are preventable. After testing over 1700 homes, researching health data, and reviewing lessons from around the country. Isles has characterized the threat and the opportunities. Now we are doing something about it at the local, state, and national level.

Isles first tested homes for hazardous lead levels. Then, two years ago, Isles started assessing homes for mold and moisture problems, pest infestations, and injury-causing conditions. We have trained thousands of parents, children. teachers, home owners, renters, health professionals, home inspectors, weatherizaton crews, public officials and civic and faith groups to identify and remove toxic threats to people in homes. In January, Isles cross-trained and employed its home weatherization crews to begin cleaning up and weatherizing homes at the same time.

Isles' subsidiary, E4 (Energy, Environment, Equity, Employment), has developed a "one-touch" approach, where work is planned and implemented in homes to make them both energy efficient and healthy.

Isles established the New Jersey Healthy Homes Training Center within Isles Center for Energy and Environment Training (CEET). We partnered with the New Jersey Department of Health to enable the participation of hundreds of home performance and health professionals in the Center's courses over the past year. As a subcontractor of the New Jersey Department of Housing, Isles also leads the New Jersey Strategic Plan for Healthy Housing, which involves over 20 agencies and nonprofit organizations. Our goal is to encourage everyone to think about homes as a performing resource, one that can be high performing (safe and efficient) or low performing (hazardous and inefficient). Many agencies and organizations have a stake in this approach, and we are learning a lot in this early stage. This is a great time to share what we've learned, that the cost of sick and leaky homes is far greater than the cost of fixing them correctly.

Elyse Pivnick, Isles' Senior Advisor and Director of Environmental Health. is a board member of the National Center for Healthy Housing (NCHH) and participates in national efforts to achieve healthier homes in older communities. The New Jersey Healthy Homes Training Center is a satellite training center of the NCHH, and our staff is trained to deliver their curricula.

For more information, or to schedule a healthy home screening or community education session, please contact Elyse Pivnick at epivnick@isles.org. For information about energy efficiency and weatherization services, please contact Alisha Ricks at ARicks@isles.org.



Isles' trained homeowner performs lead test.

You Are What You Eat... And What You Do: Some Good News

Better policies help families eat better and move around more.

It used to be that poor communities were thinner and wealthier communities more obese. Not anymore. Two years ago, a Rutgers University study revealed that Trenton children had the highest rate of obesity (47%) in New Jersey. With support from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Isles helped create the New Jersey Partnership for Healthy Kids (NJPHK/Trenton) to combat the troubling trend of increasing youth obesity. Multiple community meetings were held to gain community ideas for reversing obesity trends. This input was incorporated into an exciting NJPHK strategic plan.

Isles' Elyse Pivnick and Samuel Frisby, Mercer County Freeholder and executive director of the Trenton YMCA, co-direct the effort. Other partners include East Trenton Collaborative, Henry J. Austin Health Care Center, Shiloh Community Development Corporation, Living Hope Empowerment Center, New Jersey Future, Aramark, Capital Health, Health First, Children's Future, Union Industrial Homes, and the Trenton School Board.

Some Initial Successes:

- Four bodegas in the North Ward began to offer more nutritious items in their stores.
- A new Monument School playground was constructed with the help of over 200 volunteers on build-day and with funding from NJPHK, KaBoom (a national nonprofit), Janssen Pharmaceuticals, and many others.
- More fresh fruits and vegetables are served at lunch and snack time at Monument School, and salad bars were introduced with great success.
- NJPHK persuaded the Trenton City Council to pass a Complete Street resolution to protect pedestrians and bicyclists, and is engaged in efforts to expand a school breakfast program.
- Isles is helping students establish a school garden this spring at Monument School. We will also complete renovation of Roberto Clemente Park to increase opportunities for physical activity in Trenton.

Volunteers are welcome to join the NJPHK Steering Committee. For more information, please contact Elyse Pivnick at epivnick@ isles.org or project manager Marissa Davis at mdavis@trentonymca.org or visit our website: http://www.njhealthykids.net/



BUILD wealth

Financial Solutions Through Isles

When Mr. D's credit score sank to the 500s and his debt grew. financial havoc set in. He met with Kit Patel, Isles' Asset Building Coordinator, and learned that Isles Financial Solutions (IFS) could help him get his financial house in order within 12 months. "Needless to say, I was hopeful, but skeptical," says Mr. D.

Nationwide, more than 25% of all employees are considered financially stressed, 20% of Americans spend more each month than they earn, and 24% use high-interest, non-bank borrowing methods. The average American household owes nearly \$7,000 in consumer (non-mortgage) debt. At 25% interest, this family pays about \$1,000 per year in interest. By just making the minimum payment on that debt, it would take more than 26 years to pay it off.

This debt often results in poor credit scores, limiting where families can live and work, as well as increasing the cost of rental housing and auto insurance. It prevents them from saving money or acguiring long-term assets—the real keys to staying out of the future financial crises.

Across New Jersey, lower income communities pay millions of dollars in high interest rates, late/overdraft fees, check cashing fees, excessive service charges, and unclaimed state and federal tax credits.

The causes vary. While this debt can be the result of mismanaged personal finances, often it is the result of an unstable economic status and unforeseen crises such as job loss job, health emergencies, or expensive car/home repairs. Without assets to fall back upon, it is nearly impossible to escape these fiscal sinkholes, even for hard-working, well-intentioned people.

What can be done? Isles' experience over the years taught us how limited the impact of simply training people in financial literacy can be. Changing knowledge is a step, but far more important, and difficult, is changing behavior. This is a bit like losing weight too often we know what to do, but we don't do it. Two years ago, Isles created Isles Financial Solutions (originally called Isles Financial Fitness Club) to combine innovative financial services and an environment that builds financial strength. IFS utilizes the latest financial research with behavioral economics to empower consumers to be more financially capable. IFS makes it easy—and fun—to plan ahead, budget, track spending, make effective use of financial products, and apply sound financial decision-

making—all key ingredients of "financial capability." The goal is to increase credit scores, savings, and other assets, and decrease overall debt. Just as important, it provides hope for the future.

In two years, more than 100 IFS customers have raised their credit scores and improved their long term financial outlook. Some have saved their homes from foreclosure, and others have purchased new assets, like a home or a reliable car for work. In six months, most customers have raised their credit score by 100 points, dramatically reduced overdraft fees or excessive interest, and, with our new savings account, generated \$500 in savings. In a short time, customers have collectively saved more than \$100,000 in fees and excess interest payments.

As members improve their financial situations and credit scores, they are able to access small emergency loans, and larger "springboard" personal loans of up to \$5,000. These loans help to strategically pay down debt and further improve credit scores.

Along with long-term goal setting, customers receive regular, intensive one-



Markese Humphrey, Director of Housing and Kit Patel, Asset **Building Coordinator**

on-one coaching. Customers update a budget every month, automate their spending and saving, and improve negative aspects of their credit report. They learn painless ways to save on taxes, credit cards, cars, insurance, appliances, utilities, vacations, trips to the grocery store, and the myriad of other expenses that confront them.

Six months after starting IFS, Mr. D.

"I am proud to honestly say that IFS has not only done everything they said they would do for me in that first conversation, but Kit has literally changed my future and my life by getting me on track. My latest credit score was close to 700! I found this out when I applied for and received a credit card and line of credit on my own from one of my banks. None of these successes would have been possible before I met Kit. Now, I am moving towards my ultimate goal to refinance my mortgage at a lower rate. Thank you Isles and Kit for getting me on track."

From Community Garden to Family Table

Food is basic to family selfreliance. At Isles, we think about that connection a lot.

Two years ago, Isles expanded upon its 40+ community and school gardens to include Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in partnership with Youthbuild students. Students plant, harvest, and sell fresh and pesticide-free produce on Tucker Street, next to their school. This urban CSA includes a minifarm, a beehive, a composting bin, and a hoop house for year round growing. CSA members pay to receive vegetables, flowers, and herbs throughout the growing season, thus supporting the work of the CSA and making internship opportunities possible for Isles YouthBuild students.

In 2011, Isles' Urban Agriculture Project Manager Jim Simon began offering cooking workshops to demonstrate easy, low-cost ways to prepare and eat the new locally grown produce. Today, Jim works with a team, including AmeriCorps service member Tiana Thomas, and two college interns from Santiago, Chile. Jim's team helped design the bimonthly cooking workshops, conduct research for a community oral history project, and got their hands dirty tending and harvesting winter produce from the hoop house.

Workshops are hosted by the East Trenton Collaborative, a group of community organizations that include Habitat for Humanity, CityWorks, Isles, and HomeFront; and they are having an impact. Many families speak only Spanish, so their children are involved in both cooking and translating. The family-centered approach has led to the creation of a "Plate + Place" series, where films, cooking lessons and discussions around the themes of food and community are a big hit! Jim Simon notes, "The best way to interest kids in eating vegetables is to let them grow and prepare them."



The garden at Isles YouthBuild Institute



Jim Simon offers cooking workshops to community members.

EDUCATE and train



IYI students volunteered to paint the West Ward Community Center.

Shantae: Against All Odds

Isles YouthBuild Institute (IYI) students face challenges well beyond what a typical American (of any age) encounters. IYI is designed to be a tough-love safe haven, supporting and encouraging students to become self reliant and successful community members. Students can earn their diploma or GED, learn construction, gain job training and placement, learn life skills, and engage their family in the opportunities.

Over the last 18 years, more than 750 young people have passed through the doors of IYI and created a better life for themselves. We are honored to work with such impressive young people.

Shantae (name changed) is one of them. She was 17 years old with a two year old son when she enrolled at IYI. Because of neglect and abuse from her mother, she was placed under the care of her father. During her first year at IYI, Shantae became pregnant with her second child and needed help to leave her father's house. He was openly using narcotics, and leaving drug paraphernalia around the house. With help from her Isles case manager and DYFS, Shantae and her child were placed with her maternal aunt. When she turned 18, she and her children

were placed in HomeFront, where she received vital support, leading to independent living.

Over the course of her time at YouthBuild, and despite her unstable home environment, Shantae worked diligently on her coursework. Like most students, she graduated after two years, She currently attends Mercer County Community College.

Like Shantae, many others succeed against so many odds when they have compassionate encouragement from trained adults. The next time someone tells you that investing in teens and young adults is too late or not worth it, think of Shantae, and how important her success will be to the next generation.

Brian Brown Shares His Story

Well, when I first started YouthBuild I was lost in life. I started here because I was trying to get off of probation. So, I was going to YouthBuild, but not really going to YouthBuild. I didn't engage myself with the things that were going on in the school. Slowly but surely, I was on my way back to jail. I started selling drugs again and I did not care about anybody or anything but money. It's ok to want money, but not to get it by doing negative things. I stopped going to school and started selling dope again. I bought my first car, a 1992 Ford. I thought I was "the man" until I found myself back in the Devil's Playground, jail.

I got out after 18 months. I realized while I was in there that all of the money, the friends, and the

girls were gone. On my way back to YouthBuild I told myself, "This time I'm going to do something different. I can't be nothing selling drugs, and I don't have any friends anymore. Every time I go in jail and I come out, nobody knows me until I get money again." So, I went to YouthBuild with a game plan. I knew it wasn't going to be easy doing the right thing, especially being used to doing the wrong thing.

When I returned, YouthBuildtold me I couldn't come back. I was so mad. A month or so went by and I went back to YouthBuild. This time I had on a nice shirt and some slacks. They let me back in with open arms. That day I figured out that you can try to change your mind, but you also need to change your appearance to show the change is real.

Now, I'm doing well. I have goals and morals. I was offered a job, and for the first time I can remember, I did something right. I said "no" to the job because it was from 8am to 4pm and I have to get my HS diploma first. If it was not for YouthBuild, I would be dead or in jail, and that's the truth. I thank YouthBuild for everything.



Mentoring/Volunteer Coordinator, Esther Brahmi, with IYI students

Volunteers at Isles









Isles engages community, student, and corporate groups in volunteer projects.



Robert Eatman displays honeycomb from Trenton bees.

Bees From the 'Hood

If you garden in Trenton, Ewing, or Lawrence, you probably have tiny, buzzing visitors from Isles YouthBuild Institute (IYI). IYI has a thriving honeybee hive. These tiny visitors collect pollen and nectar from your flowers and bring it back to the hive at 33 Tucker Street in the heart of Trenton. The hive produces honey for Isles' Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project and pollinates flowers and crops in the region.

What brought the hive to the 'hood? Jim Simon, Isles' Urban Agriculture Project Manager, learned beekeeping at Rutgers University, and then installed the hive in the Isles YouthBuild Garden in May. With funds from a generous donor and technical help from Isles' board member, Bob Harris, Jim and students learned how to select the site, purchase the bees and equipment, and care for them.

Bob Harris is a retired founder of Environ and professor at Princeton University. He has raised bees for 40 years. When asked why he does it, Bob noted, "Beekeeping is fascinating and challenging. Over the last 20 years,

I have had to be very inventive and persistent in order to solve disease and insect problems without resorting to chemicals. I have always kept my honey organic. Just as importantly for me, working with the bees is very meditative." He then added, "I am always impressed by how bees work so cooperatively for the benefit of the hive. It's a good life lesson in what happens when everyone in a community does their part."

Bees normally travel within a two-mile radius, yet they can go as far as five miles from their hive to collect nectar and pollen. In fact, once a bee discovers a good source of nectar and pollen, it "tells" the location to other bees in the hive through an intricate dance. As a result, they congregate at that source, bringing far-reaching benefits.

Over the last few years, honeybees have faced serious threats from mites, pesticides, and disease. Yet countless

crops depend on these little guys for their survival. The decline in the honeybee population presents a serious threat to food production.

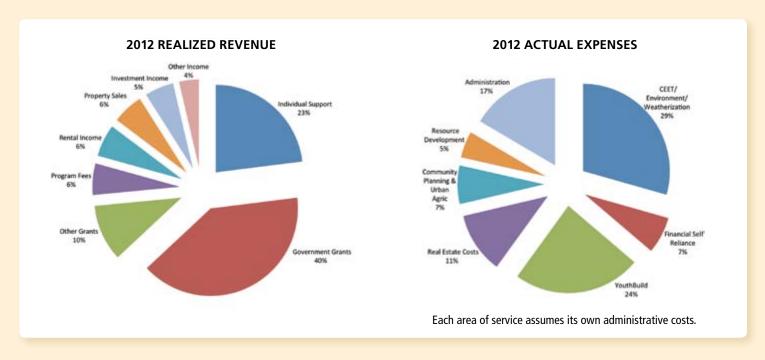
The 50,000 bees at IYI have been busy producing almost 100 pounds of honey in their new hive. "The beehive at IYI is a great learning tool," says Jim Simon. "High school students learn the bee lifecycle, help me care for the hive, and learn about its fascinating ecology. Visiting school groups see an active urban beehive. The bees produce honey for the Isles' CSA project, and plants throughout the area also benefit from the bees."

So the next time you see honeybees in your yard, be good to the tiny visitors—they may be part of a very cool community in Trenton.



Inspecting the hive.

financial summary 2012



A complete audited financial statement is available at our office or at http://isles.org/about/publications/financials

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