



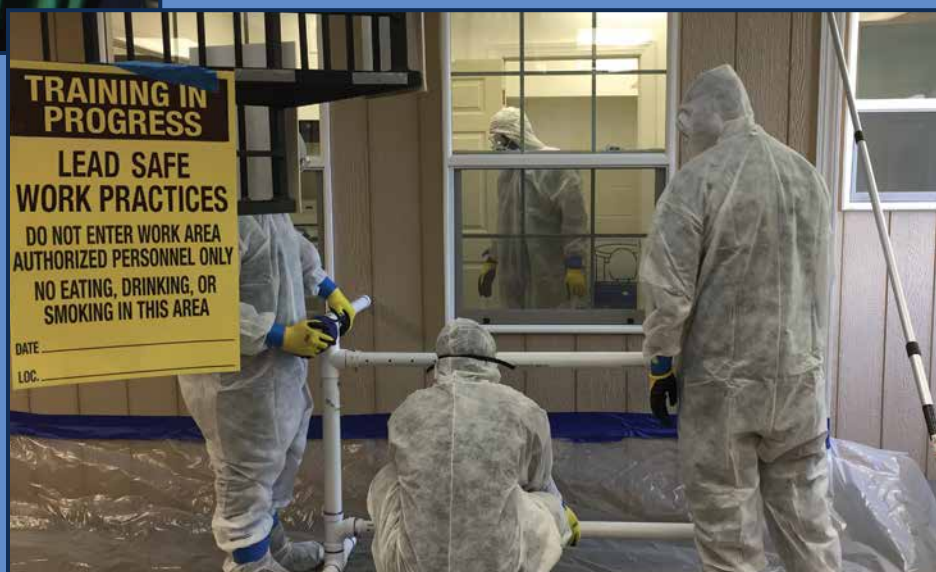
isles  
*Self-Reliant Communities*

Revitalize  
Communities

•  
Build Wealth

•  
Train & Educate

•  
Live Green & Healthy



Self-reliant families and healthy,  
sustainable communities since 1981





isles  
*Self-Reliant Communities*



# Why Isles?

In 1981, Marty Johnson and two other Princeton students believed they could find better, community-based ways to build self-reliance and restore environmental health. With a few faculty allies, they founded Isles with big ideas but no money or track record.

They believed neighborhood groups, or “islands” held the capacity to do much more, even when they lacked wealth and clout. By innovating and balancing self-interest with community interest, they could build energy efficient homes, grow food, create wealth, restore the environment and even produce jobs and energy. When two community leaders from Trenton, New Jersey asked for help, Isles moved its offices nine miles down the road to Trenton, one of New Jersey’s most challenged cities.

Over 40 years, Isles grew and learned, maintaining 2 core beliefs: that all communities hold untapped assets and potential — both human and ecological, and that building a culture of self-reliance brings more powerful, low-cost results than treating symptoms such as hunger, homelessness, sickness, violence and prison.

Isles kept asking and testing a basic question: What are the most effective ways to promote self-reliance and healthy communities?

Over time, we developed four core “pillars” that worked.

Isles:

- **trains and educates** through an alternative high school, green job training center and other community education.
- **revitalizes communities** by helping local residents plan their own future and develop energy efficient, affordable and healthy places, including homes, parks, gardens, shared public interest facilities, and more.
- **builds wealth** through innovative financial services and training to build credit and savings.
- **promotes healthy living** by restoring once-toxic environments, fostering clean energy, developing green spaces, and growing food locally.

By providing these diverse tools and services under one roof, Isles offers an integrative model that can work in other places to foster self-reliance and community health where they are most needed. With awards from the White House, United Nations and many other national and

state sources, Isles now seeks to scale our impact, expanding our assistance and teaching time tested lessons to others — nonprofits, businesses, policy makers, and future social entrepreneurs.



# Pathways to Self-Reliance

Isles offers multiple pathways to self-reliance. For some, homeownership is vital, while others seek a high school diploma or future-focused job-readiness skills. Some convert abandoned lots into healthy gardens, others target vacant or toxic buildings and revitalize them. Others create future plans for community redevelopment or family wealth creation. Together, we find practical solutions, combining on-the-ground experience with proven strategies and innovative research. See examples of this work below.

## Train and Educate

Students who drop out of high school face immense barriers to success. Many fall into the criminal justice system, some take on parenting roles, and many contend with unsafe home and street environments, posing a high risk of future incarceration. We can break this expensive cycle through Isles Youth Institute (IYI), where an investment of \$1 can return up to \$44.

In 1995, Isles created IYI to serve detached young people with a high school diploma, construction training, life skills education and the chance for hands-on redevelopment of places in their own communities. Today, IYI serves youth and families, providing education, job training, life skills and leadership development, and case management services. To save money and lives, Isles advocates for investing in youth before they enter the prison pipeline.

For many, access to high-quality, future-focused jobs continues to be a barrier. In 2009, Isles launched the Center for Energy and Environmental Training (CEET), targeting careers in energy efficiency and environmental health. CEET trains and provides nationally recognized certifications for thousands of workers and home health aides a year in green jobs and contractor capability.



Isles plans and develops real estate projects that include affordable housing, open spaces, and community facilities. Isles collaborates with residents and stakeholders to plan and implement neighborhood revitalization efforts over the long term.

For example, after facilitating a neighborhood plan with Old Trenton residents, Isles has attracted more than \$5 million in public and private dollars to rehabilitate 60+ single family homes and an apartment complex with 34 units and office spaces, bolster a nascent arts community, build community and children's gardens, distribute more than \$100,000 to small grass-roots groups, support small businesses, and provide summer camp for residents.

In addition, Isles leads city-wide research and planning efforts to further blight reduction, creative placemaking, violence prevention, and food systems. In 2014 and again in 2019, Isles completed city-wide surveys to map every vacant parcel, making the data publicly accessible at [restoringtrenton.org](http://restoringtrenton.org).



## Live Green and Healthy



With just one supermarket in Trenton, residents often shop at corner and convenience stores. Trenton residents face multiple challenges related to healthy food access, such as high costs, growing rates of obesity and type II diabetes.

Isles works to grow fresh vegetables and fruit in school and community gardens across the city, helping families grow their own nutritious organic produce, stretch food budgets, and develop healthier eating and exercise habits. Isles also provides child and adult workshops on food selection and preparation, helping families provide nutritious and delicious meals for themselves and their loved ones.

## Build Wealth

While low incomes threaten family self-reliance, an even greater threat is low wealth. With no or little savings, families live paycheck to paycheck, carrying burdens that also affect outlooks and decision making. For many, owning a home builds a bridge to wealth and financial success. Isles helps families navigate the home purchase process. For struggling homeowners, Isles works to help them avoid foreclosure.

Isles has also built and renovated hundreds of homes for first time homeowners in addition to affordable rental housing.

In addition, Isles offers employer-based financial capability coaching and financial services, like re-financing high-cost debt. Isles blends one-on-one coaching, practical financial workshops, and low-cost loans to help customers improve their credit, increase savings, and achieve their financial goals.

Asthma and lead poisoning continue to drive costly threats — underperforming students, behavior control (and the prison pipeline), health care costs and family disintegration. After years of research into environmental hazards and their impact on child health, Isles discovered an important fact: the most dangerous place for students in many neighborhoods is in their homes, where they spend over 70% of their time. For example, dust from lead paint (as well as leaded water) in older housing results in lead poisoning for thousands of children across the state.

Isles develops cost effective ways to reduce the impact of those hazards. In the past 15 years, Isles has tested 3,000 homes for lead and indoor health hazards and made more than 500 homes lead-safe. With this experience, Isles leads state and national efforts related to lead safety and home health. Isles provides technical help statewide to agencies providing lead remediation and abatements and advocates to modernize lead policies. At the same time, Isles works on other barriers to healthy living.





# Learn. Do. Teach.



## Isles Fosters Self-Reliant Families and Healthy, Sustainable Communities.

Isles offers tools and services that others use to overcome barriers to self-reliance and community health. By working to understand and fix the systems and behaviors that get in the way, Isles learns from outside “best practice” efforts, inside community and customer input, and the collisions of those ideas that drive innovation. This on-the-ground knowledge influences policy makers, funders, and other community leaders.

## Growing Our Impact — It's the System!

While Isles continues to test and develop community-based work, our ‘end game’ is to change systems, not just families and neighborhoods.

To do that, Isles applies mobile and mapping technology to improve information flow; teaches and trains via conferences, courses and webinars; offers high school and green job training curriculum online; invests in changing statewide public policies and practices; and challenges governments, foundations, businesses and others to learn along with us. For example, we developed an ambitious plan to eliminate the threat of child lead poisoning in Trenton by 2030 and statewide by 2035. Learning from the past decades, the plan includes new public policies, new approaches to funding lead home testing and remediation, training for contractors and visiting home health aides, and sharing our ‘best practices’ with other organizations across the state.

Building this capacity to scale knowledge and impacts does not happen by natural evolution or accident. It requires new types of expertise and investments. Over the next few years, Isles believes we can affect public policies statewide and nationally. That requires expanding research, technology, public education, and technical assistance to others who want to replicate Isles’ approach.



# Social Profit Center at Mill One

## Do Good. Better.

In early 2021, Isles opened the 75,000 sq ft Social Profit Center, offering high-quality space for nonprofits, social impact organizations, and artists.

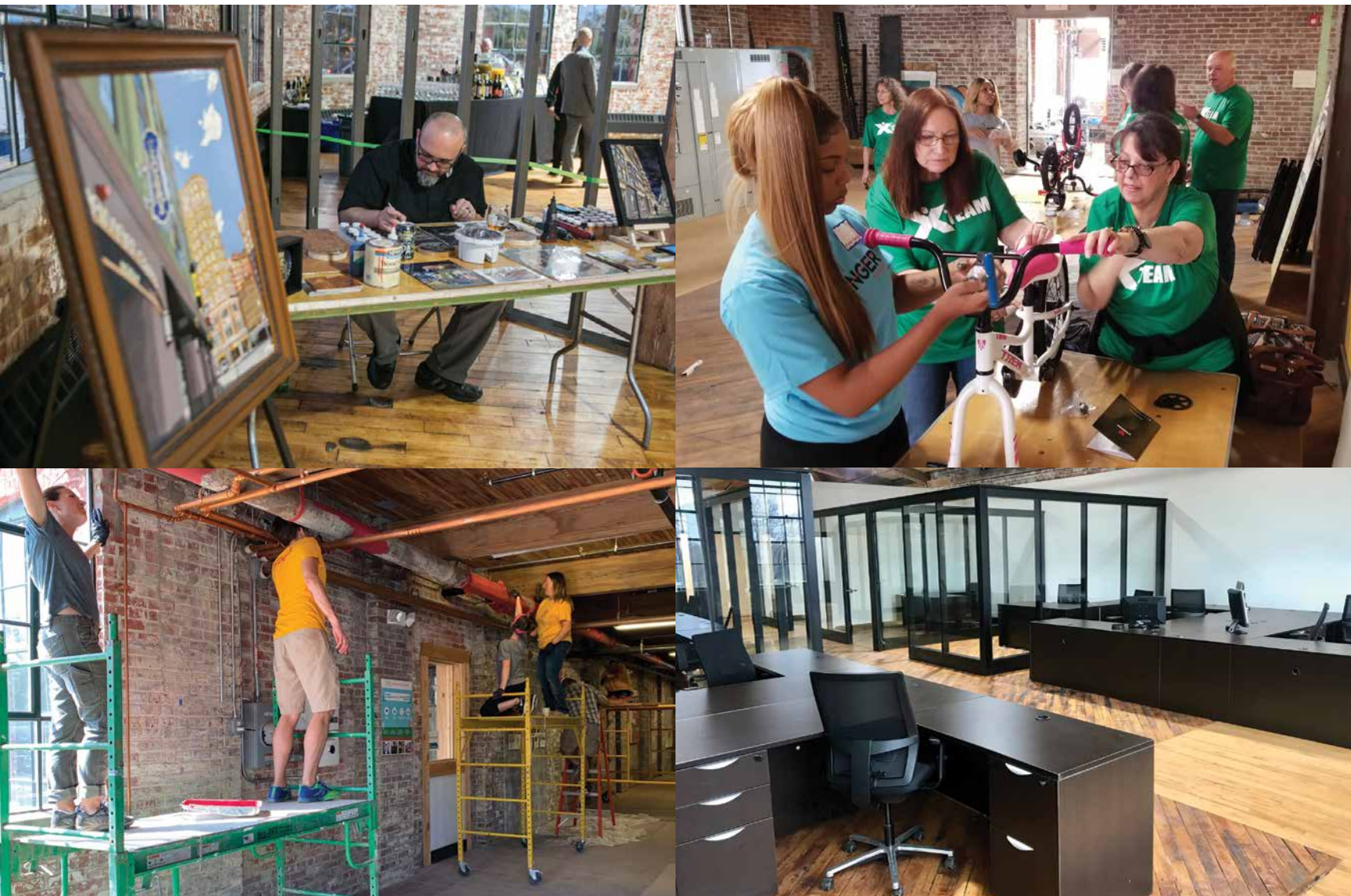
The Social Profit Center provides a place and framework for social entrepreneurs with shared values to gather, work, innovate, serve, and learn. Designed to counter challenges facing social profit groups in the region — isolation, unhealthy and underperforming facilities, and unaffordable spaces — the Center fosters peer to peer problem-solving and provides a platform to scale Isles' work.



**Social Profit Center**  
Do Good. Better.

Over the decades, Isles has co-founded regional and statewide organizations that help form building blocks for community development. For example, in 1984, Isles organized and staffed the startup of New Jersey's largest community development financial institution, New Jersey Community Capital (NJCC). NJCC, now an independent, statewide, nonprofit corporation, manages over \$200 million in community development capital.

Isles played similar roles in co-founding the Housing and Community Development Network of NJ, NJ Healthy Homes Network, and other independent organizations.







## Visit Isles' Headquarters at the Social Profit Center at Mill One

1 North Johnston Avenue • Hamilton, NJ 08609 • 609.341.4700



**Social Profit Center**

Do Good. Better.

[socialprofitcenter.org](http://socialprofitcenter.org)

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