Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

Early Childhood x Detroit, MI

ADVANCING COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS: A SPOTLIGHT

By Mark Swartz | Photos by Zak Bratto



Along Joy Road

“This is predominantly a Black neighborhood," says Sean Marshall, reference librarian, **Detroit Public Library Edison Branch**. “After the **bankruptcy of 2013**, a lot of people decided to cash out and go wherever they're going. My dad was thinking about it, but he said, ‘No, I'm not moving.’ I personally live about five minutes away. In recent years, we’ve had poor Latinos and Arabs moving into the neighborhood and redeveloping some of the housing stock here. And so now this library is starting to get a more diverse population than it has, probably, since its inception.”

Another longtime resident whose family remained rooted here is Steve Wasko, executive director and minister of service at St. Suzanne Cody Rouge Community Resource Center. He says, “Unlike some neighborhoods in Detroit that just got totally devastated, this is a stable neighborhood. We still have a public library branch. Most of the public schools still exist in the neighborhood because we have the largest percentage of school-age youth in the city outside of southwest Detroit. We have a police precinct station in the neighborhood. The neighborhood stayed intact, but there are key elements missing.” St. Suzanne houses Early Head Start and Head Start, state-licensed child care, and another

agency that provides before and after care for kids enrolled in other programs in the building or nearby.

According to Data-Driven Detroit, ZIP code 48228 (which extends beyond the Cody Rouge neighborhood) contains 54,670 people, including 16,645 children – nearly half of whom live below the poverty line. Only 14% of third grade students meet or exceed grade level standards in English-language arts, and the high school graduation rate is under 60%.







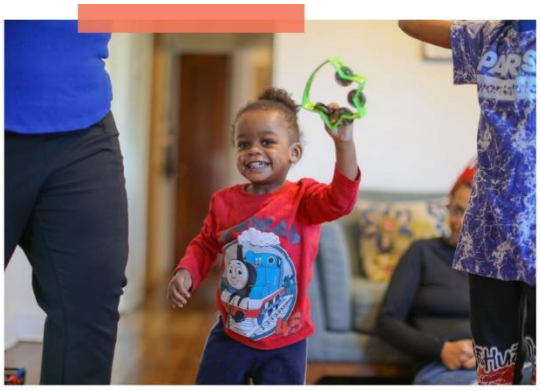
"A lot of our neighborhoods are depleted," says Larry Charleston ("Mr. Larry"), community engagement coordinator for Brilliant Detroit, who worked for the Ford Motor Company for nearly 40 years. (Ford's famed River Rouge Plant is only nine miles away.) "Soon we'll be in 24 communities. We should effectively be able to change some of the communities that we deal with. It's about building a safe neighborhood for kids to thrive in."

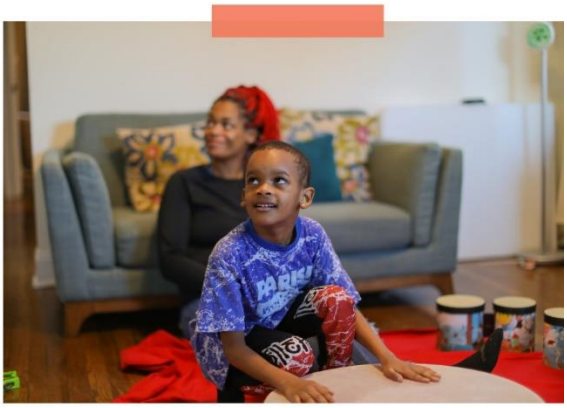
Cody Rouge Community Action Alliance, which is housed in St. Suzanne, originated with asking the community what they desired most. Founder Kenyetta Campbell recalls: "We had five planning meetings, and that was a lot of folks involved with those meetings. And then it narrowed down to the focus groups and then people would just join and be a part of that. The top concerns were safety and jobs."

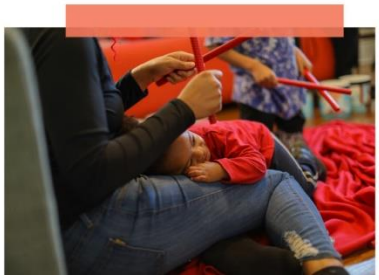
> **The neighborhood stayed intact, but there are key elements missing.**
>
> Steve Wasko, St. Stuzanne Cody Rouge Community Resource Center

Leaning on the community

Symone Wilkes, 32, is the mother of two boys, 6-year-old Dyson and 2-year-old Dylan (pronounced /DIE-lin/). “My mother had me put out when I was 17,” she recalls. “She didn’t know how to be a mom. I’m giving my children a different life than I had.” Brilliant Detroit and other organizations have equipped Wilkes for independence. “I’ve leaned on the community,” she says.







In the course of learning to advocate for herself, Wilkes has also become an activist who advocates for her neighbors and neighborhood. In conjunction with the Detroit Parent Network, Hope Starts Here, and Detroit Champions for Hope, she works with other

parents to safeguard their children's health and education as well as helping them vote and push for better local, state, and federal policy. Furqan Khaldun of Detroit Champions for Hope calls her "one of those unsung heroes of Detroit, part of a network of parents and community members bringing their skills and talents to bear."

Detroit Champions for HOPE empowers parents as their children's first teachers

Khaldun further describes his organization's model: "We pay parents for the work. We develop them as contractors and make sure we have continuous training in different aspects, so they develop their resumes and eventually branch out into other organizations."

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> Furqan Khaldun, Detroit Champions for Hope

According to Eileen Storer Smith of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Hope Starts Here coordinates 250 or more partners within city council districts and across the city. "We're letting the leaders take the lead in telling us how they work together," she says. **Imperative 2**, led by Detroit Champions for Hope, she continues, promotes "**6-A-Days**" – simple, effective tools that everyone can use to spark learning. "These are things that every parent can do to support the well-being of a child," she says.

Listening Brilliantly

A Brilliant Detroit House doesn't look like a social service office. It looks like a house. When you enter the house in Cody Rouge, which was the very first one opened, you smell Mr. Larry's cooking, and community engagement manager Danielle Harling greets you with a hug. One-third of staff are either former participants or come from the neighborhoods. Cindy Eggleton, co-founder and CEO of the organization, explains that neighborhoods invite them to set up a house. "We love on everybody who comes in our doors," she says.

“And they feel safe and then they grow. It's not the opposite order. And because of that, they come again and again and again.”





Eggleton, who hatched Brilliant Detroit while working at United Way for Southeastern Michigan, drew inspiration from the **Harlem Children’s Zone** and **MCI** (formerly the Magnolia Community Initiative) in Los Angeles. Her motivation for doing this work? “I was one of these children. My mom was in a foster home until she was 12 because of her poverty. This is in my blood, and I've been able to be on both sides of it.”

> “They feel safe and then they grow. It’s not the opposite order.”
>
> Cindy Eggleton, Brilliant Detroit

Harling and Wilkes share an especially tight connection. Dyson and Dylan both have developmental delays, and Harling has a grown son with autism. Last year, Wilkes recalls, “We were waking up to getting rained on by the pipes. There was mold, and the landlord still wanted me to pay $1,350.” Facing eviction, she relocated to another neighborhood. Harling faced a similar hardship years ago, coming home to find all of her possessions, including her dog, out in front of the building, and she has been a sounding board and a trusted advisor during Wilkes’ ordeal.







Carmen Colón, Brilliant Detroit's director of partnerships, says, "Cody Rouge has a community assets sheet, and in that sheet you're going to see all the churches, the day cares, the businesses, whatever. Because the whole point is to show us that all these places are needed to promote a 'kids success' neighborhood."

Besides cooking, Mr. Larry hosts sessions for men and fathers called Off Your Chest meetings. "Men utilize a different style, in terms of dealing with children," he says. "And oftentimes it represents structure, discipline, and protection. Those are things you need to make a kid feel safe in their neighborhood."

> **"I have lived here for over 35 years. I've raised my kids here. This was my neighborhood. And then it wasn't. And now it is again."**

Asked about surprises along the way, Eggleton mentions a participant named Dana. She was depressed. She felt disconnected. And what made the difference was Zumba, the Latin-dance-based fitness program. Coming for Zumba made her feel part of a community. She began coming multiple times a week for other programs, along with her daughter and

grandchildren. Another participant told Eggleton, "I have lived here for over 35 years. I've raised my kids here. This was my neighborhood. And then it wasn't. And now it is again."

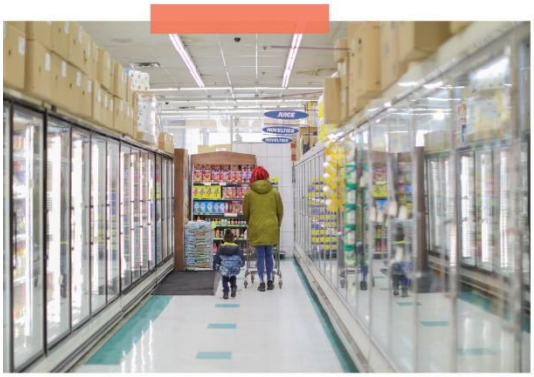
Supporting children and families through neighborhood hubs in Detroit

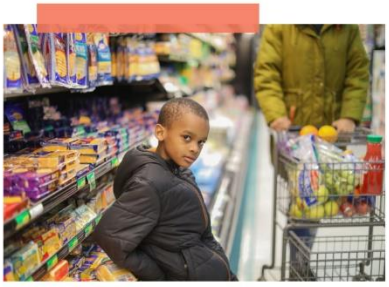
Tom Gores, owner of the Detroit Pistons basketball team, has committed $20 million to build a multi-use community center in the neighborhood. According to Erika Swilley, the Pistons' vice president for community and social responsibility, "We've been working with residents for over the last year, to figure out what they wanted to see, how we could show up. We let the community kind of do the work that we do, instead of trying to sit in a room by ourselves and come up with programs." She says this approach fits with the approach the city generally takes toward such projects: "Nobody is seeking to be the sole person on a project. It's a lot of collaboration."

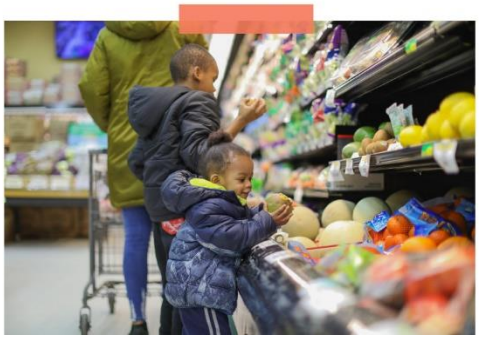
Health Partnerships in the Neighborhood

"Cody Rouge is a more organized community than it used to be, with more coordinated resources," says Dr. Herman Gray, department chair, pediatrics, at Wayne State University School of Medicine. "Life is better here than it was 20 years ago." (Dr. Gray counts Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha of **Rx Kids** in Flint as one of his former students, but stresses that now he learns from her.)

He explains an important shift in medical education. "We used to think: 'We do the medicine. Other professionals do the other stuff.' And as a result, patients felt disrespected. The family-centered care movement changed that. COVID changed it. Now we act on all that other stuff."







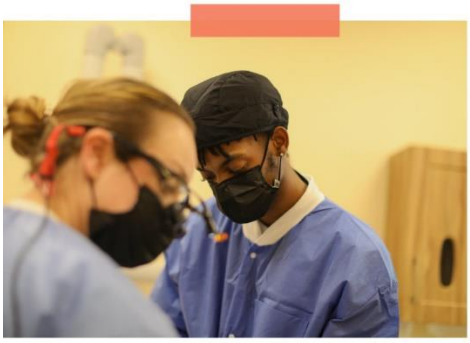
Farah Yusuf, a second-year medical student at Detroit's Wayne State University, embodies this pivot. She grew up with a mom who didn't speak English well and a dad who worked three or four jobs. "I witnessed the dark side of medicine," she says, describing how doctors' offices frequently discounted her mother's preferences. Volunteering at health nights at Brilliant Detroit's Cody Rouge house, says Yusuf, made her wish these kinds of experiences had been available to her mother. "For me, it was a pretty emotional experience and pushed me through my burnouts."

She continues, "As medical students, we learn a lot of objective facts. We're taking exams. It almost becomes robotic. But then these service learning opportunities remind you that health is a very personal topic. It reminds you why you're here."

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> Farah Yusuf

Covenant Community Care offers medical and dental services at three clinics (including a new one on Joy Road) and has three mobile dental teams that make the rounds to Head Start sites and other schools, performing oral health screenings, cleanings, and fluoride varnish for children 5 and under. "You name it, we've seen it," says mobile team manager Kara Bond. "Our restorative team gives them back their beautiful smiles."

"Parents aren't sure what to do with baby teeth," explains chief dental officer Dr. Lynn Eickholt. "Are they not important? Does it matter? We get these kids on a better pathway."







The Children's Foundation, which originated as an arm of the Children's Hospital of Michigan, aspires to create "a healthier, more equitable Michigan for kids today, and generations to come." Kelly Brittain, the organization's vice president of impact, formerly worked as a nurse in the cardiology unit, where she often treated children with asthma and other preventable diseases. "I'm hopeful because the community keeps working on itself," she remarks, "and because of newer organizations like Brilliant Detroit and Birth Detroit." She also points to state-level investments such as Pre-K for All and public-private initiatives like health hubs in public schools. "There's a lot of collaboration and a lot of smart, creative people," she says.

> **"It's about building a safe neighborhood for kids to thrive in."**
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> Larry Charleston, Brilliant Detroit"

Back to the Library

When Wilkes was a teenager, alienated from her family, she spent countless hours in the Edison branch of the Detroit Public Library. Reading about the Black Panthers and other civil rights activists expanded her world and her commitment to justice. These days, she often brings her boys to the same branch and reads with them.

“We are a pretty small branch,” says children’s librarian Kathryn Klaver (Ms. Katie), “but I feel like we can still make a pretty big impact. We do what we can to have the books in our collection reflect the population we serve.”

The neighborhood’s spirit of service impresses Klaver on a daily basis. “I have a lot of people who come in and say, ‘I'm a professional, and I've done this for years, and now I want to give back.’ Or, ‘I want to teach teens how to build resumes. I want to teach kids that they can be authors too.’ It's just so inspiring, and I'm pretty moved every day I'm here.”



This Spotlight is part of the Stanford Center on Early Childhood's new initiative to advance early childhood systems solutions. Communities everywhere are turning their focus to ways in which they can support young children and the adults in their lives. **Early Childhood X** (ECX) was created to celebrate and amplify these transformative place-based efforts. To read more ECX publications, visit **earlychildhood.stanford.edu/publications.**

About the author: Mark Swartz is a regular contributor to Early Learning Nation. The author of the children's books Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe, Lost Flamingo, Magpie Bridge and The Giant of the Flood, as well as a few novels, he lives in Takoma Park, MD, with his wife and two children.