

My Journey as a LISC Oramenta Newsome Fellow at Project Create

When I first set foot in Project Create, I knew I was in for something special. Tucked away in the vibrant Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, DC, this arts education and therapy center is a bit like finding a hidden gem in your own backyard. It's a place where the creativity of young folks can run wild and free, and I was lucky enough to be part of it as a LISC Oramenta Newsome Fellow. Over the summer, I've rolled up my sleeves, dug into the heart of this community, and learned a thing or two about the magic that happens when art and passion come together.

When you step into Project Create, you're instantly embraced by a welcoming and inspiring energy, largely thanks to Christie Walser, our Executive Director for the past 10 years. Christie's deep love for her students and the Anacostia community, coupled with her resourcefulness and infectious passion, has made her the heart and soul of Project Create. Under her leadership, the center has flourished into a nurturing haven where creativity thrives. She's supported by an incredible team: Josh Reynolds, our Program Manager of Community Partnerships, who builds strong relationships across DC; Shanay Banks, the creative force behind our Studio Programs; Katie Duncan, who compassionately leads our Art Therapy Program; and Jasmine Watkins, our enthusiastic Art Education Specialist. Together, they bring unique talents and dedication to fostering artistic growth and healing in our young artists.



Fig. 1 Project Create Building

Getting to Know the Community

One of my first tasks as a fellow was to dive into community engagement. I had the pleasure of visiting eight different schools within the DC Public Schools (DCPS) and DC public charter school systems, working closely with Josh Reynolds to strengthen our partnerships. These visits were about more than just formalities—they were about listening, understanding, and figuring out how Project Create could best serve these schools and their students. Guided by Josh's

emphasis on connection and collaboration, I was able to learn how our programs can better meet the needs of the community, ensuring that our impact was both meaningful and lasting.

The Summer Camp Adventure

Another cornerstone of my fellowship was assisting with the Studio Programs summer camp, an experience that was made all the more enriching thanks to Shanay's creative vision. We welcomed over 30 middle and high school students (Summer Youth Employment Program) from DC's 7th and 8th wards into our camp, where they were encouraged to let their imaginations soar. The camp was a whirlwind of activity, with field trips to some of DC's most prestigious art spaces, like the National Gallery of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum. Shanay's passion for the arts was evident in every detail, and Christie's commitment to the students ensured that each day was filled with inspiration and discovery.



Fig. 2 Field Trip to National Gallery of Art

The Nuts and Bolts

Behind the scenes, the day-to-day operations of Project Create were a lesson in teamwork and dedication. Christie, along with the rest of the staff, showed me what it takes to keep a nonprofit running smoothly—from managing supplies to coordinating schedules and everything in between. It's the kind of work that often goes unnoticed but is crucial to making sure our students have the best possible experience. Working alongside such a dedicated team, I gained a deep appreciation for the countless details that go into making Project Create the success that it is.

Building Something New

One of the most rewarding projects I took on during my fellowship was piloting an internship program with Christie's guidance and support from the entire team. The goal was to recruit

African American students in collegiate arts programs to teach at Project Create, creating a pipeline of talent that would benefit both the interns and our students. Christie's vision and passion for mentorship were the driving forces behind this initiative, and with the help of staff, we were able to create a program that promises to be a game-changer for our community.

I also had the chance to delve into developing logic models for our programs. This was an opportunity to work closely with the Executive Director, Christie, to map out the resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes of our initiatives. The process was a collaborative effort, ensuring that we had a clear and strategic plan for achieving our goals.

A Journey Worth Taking

As my time at Project Create comes to an end, I'm filled with gratitude for the experiences I've had and the incredible people I've had the privilege to work with. Christie Walser and the entire team have shown me the power of passion, dedication, and community. Together, they've created a space where young people are encouraged to explore their creativity, heal through art, and connect with others in meaningful ways.

Working at Project Create has been more than just a job—it's been a journey of growth, learning, and connection. I've seen firsthand how art can transform lives, and I've been inspired by the commitment of the staff to making a difference in the lives of the students they serve. Project Create has become a beacon of hope and creativity in the Anacostia community, and I'm honored to have been a part of it.

As I move forward, I carry with me the lessons I've learned and the memories I've made at Project Create. This fellowship has reinforced my belief in the power of art to build stronger, more connected communities, and I'm excited to see how Project Create will continue to grow and thrive in the years to come. The work done here is more than just about art; it's about creating an inclusive and equitable future where every member of the community can contribute to and benefit from shared economic growth and cultural vitality. I'm excited to continue my journey as a Program Coordinator for Studio Programs at Project Create.