



DREXEL UNIVERSITY
Dornsife Center
for Neighborhood Partnerships

WINTER 2019

THE DORNSIFE CENTER CONNECTOR

IMAGINE



OUR

FUTURE

DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

Dear friends and neighbors,

Since the initial launch of the Dornsife Center we have kept our shared dreams for the future front and center. So much of our programming is about laying down the building blocks for the future: we learn new skills, work on career plans, take steps to get healthier, and we write about where our community has been and what we'd like it to become.

All of this is guided by our community advisory team: members of the Powelton Village, Mantua, and Drexel communities who are committed to working together to translate our shared visions of the future into reality.

This issue highlights some of the work that we are doing together at the Dornsife Center to dream big: facilitating the planning for the West Philadelphia Community Center facility through a lens of neighborhood history; a student's reflection of arriving in Philadelphia for the next phase of his life; working on a college degree to ensure a good life for a grandchild; and building a foundation for a satisfying career.

We hope you find these stories as inspirational as we do.

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

<i>Name:</i>	Soneyet Muhammad
<i>Job:</i>	Director of Workforce & Economic Inclusion in Drexel's Office of University & Community Partnerships
<i>Hometown:</i>	Cranston, Rhode Island
<i>Current residence:</i>	Philadelphia's Point Breeze neighborhood
<i>Favorite movies:</i>	<i>Guess Who's Coming to Dinner</i> (1967) and <i>A Few Good Men</i> (1992)
<i>Favorite TV shows:</i>	<i>Greenleaf</i> and <i>Queen Sugar</i> - I don't have the Oprah Winfrey Network, but end up buying some shows through Amazon Prime to keep my TV habits nicely fed.

What is your role at the Dornsife Center?

My role is quite layered in that I lead our efforts with respect to entrepreneurship, workforce and career development, financial capability, and adult education. In addition to that, I remain focused on bringing University opportunities to local residents so they can share in the rapid growth that is being experienced in University City and self-determine their journeys to meet their goals.

Where can we find you at the Dornsife Center?

My office is in the first floor of the Carriage House.

What is your favorite thing about the Dornsife Center?

The opportunity here is only limited by our collective imagination and persistence.

What do you do when you're not at the Dornsife Center?

I have a seven-month-old daughter, Lottie, named after my late grandmother. She is teething now and keeps me, my husband, and our four-year-old son, Recio, busy as she explores eating new foods. When my husband and I get a break, we run out to dinner and reconnect, but that is rare as I am currently pursuing my graduate degree in Community and Economic Development at Penn State.

FROM WRITERS ROOM

MY WORLD DOESN'T FIT IN A CARRY-ON BAG

PAVEL STAN

I moved twice as I grew up. Out of a 2-room apartment into a house, later into a larger house during my freshman year of high school. When I first entered my room, I looked at the brand-new Ikea furniture, the mattress covered in plastic wrapping, and the pile of books scattered on the desk and wondered about the moment when I was to leave my room and never come back.

As time went by, I dreamt of coming to the states to find an education above what Romania had to offer. I worked tirelessly for two years. When the acceptance e-mail came, my dad hugged me with a proud smile as my mother stroked my hair. From that point on, I waited.

As the departure drew closer, I grew inexplicably estranged to the world around. I looked at my family at the dinner table and couldn't bring myself to talk, as if an invisible wall kept me back. Walking the same streets of Bucharest I had known for years now felt like walking through a dissipating dream.

As much as I dreamed of the States, I was completely unprepared to face them. The world here had no understanding of who I was. As time went by, I started noticing a strange feeling of lacking. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but some things were missing. I woke up every morning in silence and went to bed alone. When I traveled to the states, I left behind my country's history, my education, my family and my friends. I flew here knowing all that. What I hadn't realized before was much of who I was remained home with them.

I sought out people and places who would help me make sense of who I was becoming. Slowly but surely, the passions and hobbies I had left behind found their way back to me. I bought a classical guitar and returned to my three years long study process, and 180 colored markers to add to my 130 colored pencils, to begin drawing again. I was making sense again.

One day, I walked past a room I had never noticed before. That fact that I didn't know of it was curious since I had explored most of Drexel during my first two months of college. Two large doors plated with chalkboard paint stood open towards a modern interior. Above the entrance, "Writers Room" was written inside a grey, outlining rectangle. I thought Cool! and walked away.

The next time I passed by the entrance, I began wondering what went on inside. I theorized it must've been a faculty lounge for the English department, because of how

alluring I found the interior to be when snooping inside.

For almost a month, I walked past the room annoyed at my curiosity, convinced I wasn't allowed inside. One afternoon, I stood 10 feet away from the door, staring straight at the entrance. With my hands clenched to the straps of my backpack, I took on a defiant expression and walked in. "I'm doing it, and nobody can stop me. This is it!"

Contrary to my expectations, nobody stopped me from walking in. I marched to the center of the room, then stood there frozen. Like a dog chasing a car, I had no

idea what to do now that I had caught it. A girl sitting at a desk in one of the offices leaned towards her desk to see me better, squinting her eyes in confusion. When she saw my lost face and realized I was new, she got off her chair smiling and introduced herself. "Hi, I'm Lauren. Have you ever been to the Writers Room before?" She shook my hand and took me on a little tour of the space.



Pavel Stan reading his work at the 2018 Anthology release event

She guided me into her office and pulled a thick grey curtain in the back of the room, revealing a small chamber with no windows. To the left of the entrance sat a grey bookcase, with books categorized by handwritten pen on paper scotch tape. In front, a small comfortable striped couch with two decorative pillows. To the right, a large vintage desk modestly illuminated by the yellow light of two table lamps. The desk they gave me in my rented dorm space is about half the size of the one I had at home. It can barely fit my pencils and markers. Writers Room's large, wooden desk could easily fit all my belongings, allowing me to try and draw stuff I'd never made before. I bought a A2 size paper (4 times larger than the frequently used letter size, copy paper) and walked into Writers Room once more.

I pulled the thick gray curtains, secluding myself inside the safety of the tiny library, and took out my large sheet of paper, carefully placing it at the center of the desk. I arranged my graphite pencils to the left of it, sat down with my headphones on and started drawing.

Identity is a profoundly intrapersonal concept. Who and what I am is defined only by and through my choice of action. Still, when it went missing, I freaked out and started looking for it outside. It seemed as if every action I considered only corroded my certainty.

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As I delineated the outlines of my drawing, I felt the fog over my eyes slowly dissipate. As the drawing revealed itself, a spark of comfort slowly caught aflame in my chest. As my hand guided the lines staining the white piece of paper, I found myself once more in my parents' bedroom, jumping on their bed yelling I got into Drexel. I felt the last embrace of my high-school sweetheart as we parted for college. I heard by best friend laugh as we were fighting to stay awake the last night we spent together. The room felt familiar, and I felt at home. For a brief, fleeting moment, I was myself again.

When I stood up to leave, the warm familiarity of the room seemed to remain attached to the pale lamplight now glowing over the empty desk. I put my large sheet of paper away in the service closet and left for class. As I walked away, only one thing remained: The discovery that my world and identity were both hidden in a pale library, in the back of Writers Room.

Pavel Stan is a pre-junior Entrepreneurship major from Romania. He draws, reads, plays guitar, loves movies, music, and somehow wants to end up as a personal development coach. Yes, it's confusing for him too.

JADA GOSSETT PATHWAY TO A CAREER

Now in her fifth year as a Drexel psychology major with one course remaining to finish, Jada Gossett is looking ahead to what's next. This Philadelphia native grew up in Southwest Philly, though she went to elementary and high school all over the city. She found the Dornsife Center when it was time for her second co-op cycle. Her first co-op job went heavy on psychology research and she had the important realization that research wasn't where she wanted to be. So she went in search of a second co-op that might teach her something about the nonprofit service world and about working closely with community.

The Dornsife Center was relatively new at the time, having just opened two years previously. The chance to get to know another Philadelphia neighborhood, and to learn more about how development and change were a part of the picture, was especially appealing to Gossett. Her job was an administrative position: running the front desk, greeting newcomers and helping them get oriented to the Dornsife Center, and helping residents find activities they were interested in from the program calendar were part of her everyday duties. "I talked to pretty much everyone who came through the front door, including neighbors, community advisory council members, Drexel students and faculty, and sometimes even [Drexel president] John Fry." Gossett also helped run the community dinners.

Gossett notes that her favorite part of the work was being a "fly on the wall" at staff meetings. Being able to see behind the curtain, and to understand how programming happens validated her chosen career pathway. "I really enjoyed hearing and learning about all the process that is involved in running a place like the Dornsife Center: how a program gets put together, and how to be more present in the community. It's not just a

scattershot thing, but takes time and care, and that was valuable to me as a student heading for a career in the nonprofit service world. Being able to see behind the scenes gave me so much information."

Gossett's biggest surprise was learning how much she enjoyed getting to know community members who came to the Dornsife Center for meetings and programs. "I enjoyed all the conversations I had, especially with senior citizens, and even now when I am walking in the neighborhood I sometimes run into people who remember me. So I feel like I have been impacted by those participants, and I hope I've had an impact on them."

With just one course remaining to finish her B.S. degree, Gossett has already taken a full-time job with the Scattergood Foundation, which supports behavioral health philanthropy, advocacy, and policy. An administrative and communications position gives her a great launchpad for a career in behavioral health services. If Gossett had a piece of advice for Drexel students looking for opportunities at the Dornsife Center, it would be simply to talk with people. "Talk to as many people as you can about anything and everything! I learned so much from everyone who walked in the door - including our University & Community Partnerships staff, and community residents who have so much to share - they have a world view we will never get as Drexel students if we rarely leave campus. Just interacting with people and talking about their work and their lives was really valuable, and whether you are there as a co-op, a work-study student, or you are taking a Side-by-Side course, you can get so much insight from others, and you can share insights of your own."



Jada Gossett

MUJAHIDDEEN MOHAMMED

LOOKING FOWARD FROM OUR HISTORY

A new member of the Dornsife Community Advisory Council, a veteran of Side-by-Side courses, and now a facilitator for the public planning process around Drexel's integration of the West Philadelphia Community Center (WPCC) space into the Dornsife Center, Mujahiddeen Mohammed truly has jumped in with both feet to help shape the Dornsife Center's culture and community.

Mohammed, originally from Newark, New Jersey, was homeschooled by his grandmother in Philadelphia, bouncing back and forth between here and Newark as a child. He now works with the New Africa Center, Philadelphia's Muslim American museum and archive, on Lancaster Avenue. He first discovered the Dornsife Center when he enrolled in the History of Philadelphia Side-by-Side course with the New Africa Center's executive director, Brother Rahim. Through the course



Mujahiddeen Mohammad

they uncovered a lot of Mantua's history, including an Underground Railroad trail, and this sparked in him the idea that it is important to connect local historical events to the present and the future. It also inspired him to create the New Freedom District Tour, a self-guided tour of West Philadelphia historical sites of particular significance to African Americans, itself part of a larger goal of creating a destination in Philadelphia for learning about struggles for freedom.

As he became better acquainted with Drexel he became interested in the University's 150-year history as a blue-collar institution that grew into prestige – and he felt a connection to that trajectory. To him, Drexel's work with local communities to go on that journey together felt unique and important. Mohammed noted the principle of “sankofa,” which is about honoring the past while looking towards the future, and this is his commitment

to his community. “For us to honor our parents’ stories and take that inspiration into the future – that is reflected in how Drexel celebrates its past.”

As a facilitator in the process of planning the future of the WPCC building, Mohammed listens to stories from neighborhood residents about what the facility has meant to them. He has paid close attention to their concern about the changes ahead since the previous building owners Caring People Alliance embarked on their own shift to another facility further west, and he worked to create in these planning sessions what he refers to as “share freedom space” – “a lot of times with community meetings it's what the institution wants, and community members want to hear that they'll get what they want, but in a share freedom space we all get something that we want in the process.” The memories of WPCC as a safe haven for the community resonated with him, and he is especially interested in creating a set of programs that are inclusive, affordable, and that integrate activities for youth, young adults, and elders.

For Mohammed, being part of a network of community activists reminds him of something one of his entrepreneurship mentors shared with him: you may think you are doing things and pursuing goals independently, but at the same time somebody else is doing it, too, but you don't realize it until you find each other. He thinks about the importance of “connecting the humanity of organizations” that are all working towards inspirational visions of the future, and with respect to the WPCC planning process, reminds us that these connections must always come ahead of deciding what specifically goes into a building.

Mohammed finds the life of Mantua's own Dr. Herman Wrice especially resonant in the way that Wrice's “Young Great Society” mentorship program created a sense of community responsibility linked to aspiration for the future. “A lot of people have grown up, got mature, left the neighborhood, experienced life as adults, and are now coming back to the city. We're back, but we cannot forget everybody who stayed here while we were gone. We have to consider all of these people, and these moving parts, to create insight and respect for history and local culture.” All of this builds towards what Mohammed thinks of as the “American Intention” – not the “American Dream” but an improvement on it: an intention that has a place for him and his community in it that is full of pride and hope, building on the inspiration of the past.

Learn more about the planning process for the West Philadelphia Community Center building on the Dornsife Center's website at www.drexel.edu/dornsifecenter

ROSALIND WILLIAMS FOR HER FAMILY'S FUTURE

Rosalind Williams is the first graduate under the State of Pennsylvania's thirty college credit option offered at the Dornsife Center's Helms Academy.

Williams originally found out about the Dornsife Center because she was in the right place at the right time. She'd been noticing things about the Dornsife Center property several years ago, as she was recuperating from a stroke. She noticed the renovations at the site and occasionally saw balloons outside the buildings, but she wasn't sure exactly what the place was all about.

One day, heading down 36th Street, she saw former Helms Academy instructor Drea Diggs outside the corner store across from the Dornsife Center, and Williams asked Diggs what she knew. That turned into a two-hour conversation, and in the end Williams signed up to be a Helms Academy student. The Helms Academy is a partnership between Goodwill Industries of Philadelphia and New Jersey, Community College of Philadelphia, and the Dornsife Center. It is designed to help adult students earn their high school diploma while simultaneously furthering their education with dual-earned college credits. The Helms Academy is a free service giving students the best possible chance to succeed in an ever-evolving workforce.



Rosalind Williams

"At first it was hard because it had been so long since I'd been in school. Drea gave me a couple of books to read to get my mind active again. I had been there for about a month when she hit me up with the 30-credit opportunity!" Williams settled into a weekly habit of spending time in the Helms Academy classroom, and then stopping in to work in the Open Lab where staff gave her even more encouragement to get up to speed with her computer skills. Williams noted that the stroke had seriously impacted her health, her memory, and her confidence. Jumping into an academic program felt like an enormous challenge, but "it worked out well, and I started coming to other Dornsife Center programs, like the community dinners."

Williams' confidence grew as she worked her way through the program. That confidence boost is one of the things she liked most about participating in the program. "I wondered if it was too much, but everybody made sure I was okay, and assured me that they would work with me no matter what, even when I got sick during my time in the program. I loved the warmth and understanding, and that meant a lot." Her Helms

classmates were supportive, too, although some did not complete the program.

Williams discovered an interest in behavioral health sciences, and focused most of her studies in that area while taking classes offered by the Community College of Philadelphia. Thanks to her persistence and dedication to the program, she recently became the Dornsife Center's first Helms Academy graduate to achieve her high school diploma and thirty credits.

What's next for Williams? She is working on her remaining 30 credits to finish an associate's degree in Behavioral Health and Human Services. Her experience with having a grandchild diagnosed with autism inspired her new career pathway: "I want to be an advocate for kids with autism. Philadelphia has good services but they are limited, and I want to help parents connect to the information they need to support their children. I know how frustrating it can be."

For Williams, equipping herself to contribute to support services for children with autism is about her grandson's future as well as her own. "Every kid deserves a fighting chance." Before her stroke, she didn't feel that continuing her education really mattered very much. "I'd gotten this far in life, what difference did it make? I always had a job, and not having a college degree didn't stop me, but after I was sick I wondered what I could do, and how I could help people. I made sure I got the credentials to accomplish what I want to do."