



DREXEL UNIVERSITY
Dornsife Center
for Neighborhood Partnerships

SPRING 2019

THE DORNSIFE CENTER CONNECTOR

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IN

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DIRECTOR'S WELCOME

Dear friends and neighbors,

It's now five years since our official grand opening of the Dornsife Center, back in June 2014. Since that time we've worked hard to build friendships and partnerships with community residents and organizations alike. One thing we've always been sure about is the importance of including residents in our operations staff at the Dornsife Center and with our Office of University & Community Partnerships. It's one of the best ways we know to have an authentic presence in the community, and we think our work is better when people who really know the neighborhood are part of our team.

In this issue you'll meet four members of the Drexel staff who you'll see at the Dornsife Center: Brenda Lewis, Dominique Coleman-Williams, Jada Samuel, and Jeffrey Jordan. They all live in and around Mantua and West Belmont, and their intimate understanding of these neighborhoods and of their neighbors keeps our feet on the ground when it comes to how we design and manage our programs and events. You'll also read another wonderful slice of life from our Writers Room Tripod series: a reflection on a moment from three writers that likewise invites us to reflect on memory and familiarity.

We hope you'll enjoy the issue.

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

<i>Name:</i>	Jada Samuel
<i>Job:</i>	Office Assistant
<i>Hometown:</i>	Philadelphia
<i>Current residence:</i>	the Mantua neighborhood
<i>Favorite sport:</i>	Basketball: I played on my high school varsity team
<i>Favorite hobby:</i>	Cooking

What is your role at the Dornsife Center?

My role here is to assist the programming team and to assure that the program partners that we work with have the best experience here at Dornsife.

Where can we find you at the Dornsife Center?

I can be found almost anywhere, since my program support role takes me through every building, but after checking in with the program partners I am in the main office in the Lindy House.

What is your favorite thing about the Dornsife Center?

My favorite thing about the Dornsife Center is that we want the community to participate and we always find ways to include the children. I don't remember having anything like this when I was kid.

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

When I am not at the Dornsife Center I am with my two year old daughter, Devyn, doing motherly duties or I'm with other family or friends.

FROM WRITERS ROOM
THE BOY WITH THE BALL
KALIYAH PITTS
PATRICIA BURTON
DEVIN WELSH

Kaliyah

In this frame there is a playground, somewhere kids can run around and be kids. Somewhere to meet new friends at or just play around with their family. It might just be me but when I was younger I used to hate just sitting on the bench watching my cousins play, but now that bench seems like the perfect spot to sit and relax while I watch kids play.

Just outside of it there are people rushing to work, just hanging around conversing with their friends, kids playing basketball, cars beeping their horns because some driver decided to stop at a green light and people walking round taking photos, which was us.

Patricia

I remember the joy of playing ball. Any kind would do. I remember Dodgeball, king ball, baby in the air, oldy mommy witch...all the street games we played well in the evening as warm summer breezes carried our laughter through open windows and rooftop patios where folks gathered to catch the smallest promise of a breeze.

Children bring a carefree, joyful exuberance to life. They see possibilities not limitations. As the little guy in the photo shows they wait expectantly as the ball approaches confident that they will catch it, or maybe the bounce is part of the joy? To experience the up and down of the ball was our preparation for life...and sometimes we totally missed the catch and we were "out of the game." But that didn't dampen our enthusiasm in the least, because we knew that we could always put our dibs in for the next game.

Devin

What's in the frame:

The boy and his boots are walking with a purpose, a destination in mind: that ball. Where's it gonna end up, he doesn't care, that isn't his concern. He doesn't see the bright red stop sign a few feet above his grey-hatted head, nor does he care what it has to say. That's not his concern. His eyes fixed on the ball bounce with it as it tried to escape him, but it won't, you can tell by the way he's steppin', that ball is his one and only concern.

Just outside the frame/what happens after:

"Boy, don't you go in that street." A nice stranger scoops the ball up off the black concrete and bounces it back to the boy, putting both him and his mama back at ease. "Don't just take it and run - whaddya say?" But that boy didn't hear her; he was just happy to have his ball back, and the stranger could feel the gratitude in the way that boy bounded back for the court. Words weren't his concern.

Maybe the stranger remembers chasing his ball into the street, catching heat from his mama, and the stranger who helped him. He smiled and saw the boy chasing his ball up and down the court.

Now that the stranger can relate to, the feeling of chasing that ball as it bounces toward a dream that he's had since before the stranger helped him. He smiled again.



Photos by Kaliyah Pitts

JEFFREY JORDAN

A COMMITMENT TO SERVICE

If West Philadelphia Promise Neighborhood Community Outreach Coordinator Jeffrey Jordan looks familiar to folks visiting the Dornsife Center, it's because he's been a community leader in the Belmont neighborhood where he has lived for the past 15 years. This West Virginia transplant started his career as an extension agent with West Virginia University, teaching nutrition in public schools and coordinating 4-H in Charleston. He grew up in the program and is a 4-H All-Star, their highest-level award.

Jordan is a founding member of the West Belmont Civic Association and still serves on the executive board. "I am an at-large member, and for Community Day I organized it as the chairperson, and I also serve on the public safety committee, which works towards getting police cameras set up in Belmont."

He first learned about the Promise Neighborhood project - a five-year-long initiative to build a network of supports for neighborhood education and health outcomes - through his work with the civic association, and found out that Drexel was hiring neighborhood surveyors for the project and he decided to apply, and got the job. "It was a great introduction to Promise Neighborhood. It was also a great opportunity to connect with parts of my community that I hadn't connected with before, and to have conversations with neighbors and hear that they had hope, determination, and pride in their neighborhood." Jordan's work as a surveyor and his experience as a neighborhood organizer made him a perfect fit for the Community Outreach Coordinator position.

The work fits into a lifelong commitment to service that had begun with his WVU extension and 4-H work in West Virginia. When he arrived in Philadelphia in the early 1990s he got involved with LGBTQ organizing, and also soon found himself stepping into the role of pastor at Metropolitan Community Church, a position he's held since 1994 - and it's how he met his now-husband David. David, equally community-minded, is also involved in the West Belmont Civic Association and currently serves as its president.

When he moved into the West Belmont neighborhood, Jordan quickly felt at home. "I had spent a lot of my time since moving to Philadelphia organizing in the LGBTQ community, and I got a little burned out on that, but I was excited to take those organizing skills to my neighborhood." And he found a warm welcome there: "To not have to be closeted, and have my community accept me for whom I am, a black gay man, that is important to me."



Jeffrey Jordan

As part of the Promise Neighborhood team, Jordan continues to work closely with neighborhood partners, looking for opportunities to share information about the project, and working with the rest of the team to establish sites for programs like summer Playstreets. His ambition for his neighborhood has a couple of different aspects: "One, for it to be a safe environment. Two, I want community-member-led development. I want improvement, but I want the community to lead it. Three, I want a good grocery store! And to go get a cup of coffee in the morning. I would love to see legitimate businesses move in. It's going to happen - development happens - but it doesn't have to look like gentrification. We can be a better place, and a safer place, but with the citizens behind it. I want our kids to learn and feel safe going to school. And I want our homeowners to be able to keep their homes in the process, and I don't want to lose the culture of the neighborhood. There are things that feel unique to Philadelphia, like block parties, sitting on the porch and talking to one another, and knowing your neighbors by name."

DOMINIQUE COLEMAN-WILLIAMS

A COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION

Mantua resident Dominique Coleman-Williams was the Dornsife Center's first staff member hired onto the team back in early 2014, when she joined the Drexel team as an administrative assistant. At the time, the Dornsife Center itself was in the middle of its eleven-month-long renovation that lasted from summer 2013 into May 2014, and we were running programs out of what we called the "one-room schoolhouse" in the Philadelphia Housing Authority Mantua Square's community room on Fairmount Avenue.



Dominique Coleman-Williams

As part of the team from the start, Coleman-Williams has been instrumental in the Dornsife Center's evolution and growth, and at the same time she has diligently pursued her own education and career path while supporting her own children's education. The Dornsife Center continues to benefit from her perspective both as a Mantua resident and as young professional in the field of behavioral health.

Coleman-Williams first found inspiration to pursue training in behavioral health in a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) crisis-response training that the Dornsife Center staff attended at People's Emergency Center. About the program, she says, "MHFA is an eight-hour course that teaches the skills needed to identify, understand, and respond to signs of behavioral health challenges or crises. Now that I am certified I am able to recognize the signs of a crisis and administer aid until appropriate treatment and supports can arrive, or until the crisis is resolved."

That experience, learning about how to support people in crisis, led Coleman-Williams to more seriously pursue a degree in behavioral health counseling, which she is working on now. And that continued professional

training, she finds, is relevant to her work every day at the Dornsife Center. Anybody doing work that is public-facing encounters people from all walks of life, who arrive with a vast range of personal experiences. "I found that when doing the work that the Dornsife Center does in the community we must do it from a trauma-informed perspective which led me to enroll in Drexel's behavioral health counseling program. Whether it is a natural disaster, bullying, or a death in the family, we all go through it. And for some people it hits harder.

The only difference is how our brains react and ultimately how we find ways to cope with that traumatic event. Sometimes it can evolve into mental disturbances such as depression or anxiety, or even physical issues like weight loss or weight gain, or substance abuse. In the end it affects our quality of life and how we navigate through it. My education and training has helped me develop a different perspective on how I interact with all individuals, whether it is a colleague, a funder, or a neighbor."

These days Coleman-Williams is the Dornsife Center's Partnerships Coordinator. In that role she facilitates partnerships and collaborations with community members, nonprofit organizations, service agencies, and "anybody who approaches us initially to inquire about doing programs." She works closely with partners to set up a programming plan that can work and to help get a new program off the ground. Recently, for example, she brought a new after-school music program on board:

"Share the Spotlight" teaches music performance and helps musically-inclined middle and high school students get into performing arts schools, helping them prepare applications and auditions. Since the Dornsife Center's launch, her job has evolved from "keep the place open and going!" to "how can we cultivate high-quality and effective programming that participants find useful?"

Coleman-Williams notes that "we've come a long way" since the Dornsife Center first opened its doors, and is glad that the Dornsife Center is a safe haven for many neighbors. That sense of welcome is not an accident, though: with her professional training she is able to work with the front-office staff to make sure that everybody who comes in the door is treated with kindness. "I always tell student employees to treat everyone who walks in our doors with the same respect and dignity, whether it is Drexel President John Fry or a person with housing insecurities who may be homeless. I try to take a holistic approach to being civically engaged and the way we collaborate on and develop certain programs here at the Dornsife Center. My goal is to help folks (students and neighbors alike) to develop the emotional, social, and intellectual skills needed to live, learn, and work in their community."

BRENDA LEWIS

A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

Brenda Lewis appeared in one of the very first participant profiles here in the Dornsife Center Connector, after we had just launched programming in 2013 and 2014. Lewis had begun visiting the open computer lab, then known as KEYSPOt - part of a citywide network of open-access public computing labs - while the Dornsife Center was in its temporary accommodations at Mantua Square. She was looking for support putting together a website for the Mantua Civic Association, newly forming at the time. Little did she know at the time that she was getting into a "one thing leads to another" story.

Lewis had been using the lab for a year or so, working on the MCA website and expanding her skill base, when she took advantage of an opportunity to step into a temporary job in Drexel Human Resources, doing some filing for Courtney Claiborne, the Drexel HR specialist who runs the Career Services with HR program at the Dornsife Center. When that job concluded she started to jump into some of the Side-by-Side courses at the Dornsife Center, taking classes alongside Drexel students. When she came back to continue brushing up on her digital skills at the KEYSPOt, lab manager Kevin Williams said he needed some help running the lab, as a second computer lab had just been added to support Helms Academy. And so she stepped into this new role with on the support side of the Dornsife Center's suite of adult education programs.

Lewis's first task in her job was setting up a roomful of new computers with the right software: "that was my start to getting deeper knowledge about computers. I was familiar with using them, but to actually go in and set one up...Kevin showed me how to do that and I am comfortable doing it now."

On a normal day in the lab, Lewis helps users in a number of ways. She helps those new to computers with basic digital literacy skills, guides people to their first email accounts, and helps with job applications. "Mostly now people have their resume and just need to jump on the computer and apply for a job. The job board is a big hit. People come in to look at the board to see what they qualify for, and I help them get on the computer to apply for the jobs."

In her five years of helping run the lab, Lewis has gotten to know the community of lab participants well. "It's very gratifying. People are just so nice. One guy brought me flowers after I helped him with an application and he got a job! When you do nice things for people it's just out of just doing my job really, but they always come back or call just to say how appreciative they are. That's a good feeling. Sometimes you don't even know the difference you are making at the time. But I helped somebody today."



Brenda Lewis

Lewis has found an opportunity for professional growth in her work with the computer lab. "I was a high school graduate

and worked for Social Security for 39 years. When I came out of that work everybody had master's degrees, and I didn't. I started volunteering at a community center daycare and I ended up landing here and started learning about how to operate and work computers, and that gave me a different and new career. I did manage people when I was in government, but to come and manage a computer facility, it was a big thing for me. I am having a nice time in my job. I was really nervous when Kevin said "eventually you'll be taking care of the KEYSPOt" and I was like 'really?' but throughout the years I have been here it has become easy. I love to come to work."