

Phyllis Wheatley Community Center supports families and youth in North Minneapolis



Youth from Dream, Explore, Connect! create a community garden in front of Bethune School. (photos by Grace Grinager)

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The Phyllis Wheatley Community Center has supported generations of North Minneapolis families as an educational resource and gathering place. The Center gets its name from an 18th century African American slave who overcame the many obstacles that poverty and discrimination set in her path, becoming the first African American to publish a book of poetry. The staff, mission, and programs of the Phyllis Wheatley Center use their namesake as an inspiration. They encourage all participants to find the strength in themselves to overcome the challenges they face and become successful, community leaders. Located adjacent to Hertiage Park and Bethune School in the Near North neighborhood in Minneapolis, the Center opened its doors in 1924. Since then, it has continuously served as a education and social support hub for area families and youth.

The Phyllis Wheatley Center started as part of the settlement house movement, providing low-income people with safe housing, child care, and youth enrichment activities. As current executive director Barbara Milon explained, “We were like a magnet for the community—a gathering place. We were the first organization in the area to serve the African American community, but from the beginning we’ve always embraced anyone who has come through our doors.” The Center’s longstanding commitment to honoring diversity stood in stark contrast to the segregationist policies that prevailed in Minneapolis during its early days. At this time, downtown hotels routinely prohibited African Americans. As a result, out of town visitors of color often stayed at Phyllis Wheatley. Among them were famous artists and musicians such as poet Langston Hughes and singer Marian Andersen. In response to broad discrimination the Phyllis Wheatly Community Center became a vibrant cultural hub for the Twin Cities where artistic icons and locals could gather.

 In 1969 the construction of Interstate Highway 94 led to the demolition of the Phyllis Wheatley Settlement House at 909 Aldrich Avenue North. At this time the organization moved to its current home, leading it to more closely partner with Minneapolis Public Schools and the city’s Park and Recreation system. But even in its new home the Phyllis Wheatly Community Center reminds visitors of its past. As you enter the current building, you see the original building’s cornerstone standing as a monument to the Center’s rich history of community involvement.

As I visited the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, I was struck by the level of dedication in its staff members, many of whom have worked there for years, some for decades. They combine research-based practices and a focus on building strong relationships with each individual participant. Deb Tomasino, Director of Youth Services explained that, “We don’t serve thousands of people, but we do a really good job with those we do serve. People who come and experience our programs come back.” She laughed, “they keep coming back for more.” Deb explained that parents of children in their early childhood programs often were once students there themselves, a tradition that sometimes stretches back for generations.

Programs at Phyllis Wheatley Center currently have three areas of focus:

The Mary T. Wellcome Childhood Development Center: Early childhood programs started at the Phyllis Wheatley Center in 1929, making it the oldest continuously running program in the state. Currently, its programming serves children from six weeks of age to kindergarten. Its results have been phenomenal—in the past four years, 98 percent of its graduates have tested kindergarten ready. Throughout Minneapolis, only about 60 percent of children enter school at this level.

Youth Development

Academic Achievement The center offers a mentoring program for K-3 students at Bethune or Lucy Laney School who are not meeting state proficiency standards. Twice a week for 45 minutes, participants work with a mentor on reading and math. In the 2010 program year 86 percent of participants met or exceeded state standards by the end of the year.

Be at School This program recognizes the strong correlation between attendance and academic success. In partnership with Hennepin County, staff work with referred families to create a plan to improve students' school attendance.

Dream. Explore. Connect. Both after school and during this summer, this youth enrichment program offers participants a chance to explore the world through outings, experiential activities, and service projects. This summer their focus is on the environment. Youth have been working with Hennepin County Master Gardeners and Urban 4-H to create and maintain a community garden in front of Bethune School.

Family Services Phyllis Wheatley Center offers programs for both victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. Hennepin County databases show that their 20 week “Stronger Together” program is the most effective in the county at preventing perpetrators from re-offending. With the support of the McKnight Foundation, the Center is currently developing a curriculum based on this program that can be used by other organizations.

Aside from these focus areas, the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center also offers a computer lab which is open to the community. This lab, which is part of the University of Minnesota's Broadband Access Project, also offers free computer classes.

By the beginning of August, the Center will also open the doors to a new early literacy development center. This installation is a collaboration between Phyllis Wheatley Community Center and the Children's Museum. It will offer a learning-rich environment with many hands-on activities for young children and their caregivers to enjoy together.

If you are interesting participating in or volunteering for the Phyllis Wheatley Community Center, please contact them at 612-374-4418. You can also make a donation to support the Center by following the [“Donate Now” link on their website.](#)

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