



focus on Capacity

the Learning Web

Learning by doing...youth becoming adults

Building Capacity through Authentic & Equitable Relationships

Transformation begins with knowledge and awareness. The Learning Web team applies this principle to our vision to create opportunities outside of school where young people can learn by doing with the support of caring adult mentors. According to social justice and nonprofit experts, authentic partnerships require clear shared goals, transparency, and an appreciation of the diverse contributions each partner makes as well as the supports needed to participate as equals in leadership, power, resources, risk, and recognition. We know that youth participants are better served when our network of community collaborators share in this understanding.

Since our last update we've focused on building deeper, authentic, and equitable relationships with our partners in order to build the capacity of our programs that touch hundreds of youth and young adults every year. These relationships are at the core of our mission and remain the foundation of our work.

To remain purposeful and appreciative, many of our core partners are highlighted in this newsletter. From an apprenticeship at the Hanger Theatre, a middle-school community service project serving Challenge Workforce Solutions, and an Ithaca Journal news article highlighting our community's need for homeless prevention services – each help us build our capacity to support young people.

One unique partnership with Cornell University and the ACT for Youth Center for Community Action assists us in sharing the voices of our most vulnerable youth through the Independent Living Survey, a participatory research project that generates both community awareness and critical resources to prevent and end youth homelessness.

We hope these stories transform your understanding of our work and we invite you to join us in relationship wherever we might find common and equitable work in service to youth.

With gratitude,

Neoma Mullens

“The Learning Web is filling a community need that will help break the cycle of homelessness and put young people in Tompkins County on a path to hope and dignity,”

Stephen Fournier,
KeyBank Central New York Market
President.



Learning Web participants join Steve Fournier and Kwanza Humphries, Regional Corporate Responsibility Officer for Keybank at the BIG check presentation supporting Youth Outreach.





Animal Biologist in the Works—



17-year-old Meika Johnson, pictured left, with Patch, the ball python, is literally wrapped up in her apprenticeship at the Free Science Workshop (FSW).

Passionate about biology, specifically animal-focused biology, Meika started an apprenticeship

with co-mentors Anna Wilson and Claire Fox at FSW, located in the Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services Hancock Street apartments, where Meika bonded with Patch, their ball python. FSW, founded in 2017 is an Ithaca non-profit providing a supportive, community-based space for low-income and under-represented youth to explore their world, and expand their capabilities, through science and creativity.

FSW's mission and Meika's apprenticeship goals were a match—Meika wanted to learn about the biology of all the animals, how to safely care for them, and how to share her knowledge of animals with younger participants. That's where she met Patch, along with pigeons, snakes, tarantulas, bearded dragon, mice, and all kinds of insects.

Claire admires Meika's skill and dedication, "Meika worked one-on-one with the kids to develop their knowledge and skills in how to care for animals. She took initiative—she really loved our ball python and she took initiative to create a whole new enclosure and a lot of kids around the workshop contributed to it—there was this grand vision for this vivarium [a terrarium for snakes!] that would be made out of a reused cabinet. She did all kinds of research about what plants would thrive in the environment and she's really excited to work on that component."

Meika's skills have landed her a paid position as a student intern at FSW. She is committed to a career in veterinary care. Her connection with Patch and FSW has brought her many steps closer to her goal.



Preventing Homelessness— Learning Web pilot program teaches life skills,



Learning Web participants & friends, Chuck Stilwell, right, with Don Medard

The following article was excerpted with permission from a piece written by Matt Steecker for The Ithaca Journal. Follow Matt Steecker on Twitter @OnTheStecord

At 13, Chuck Stillwell, of Freeville, first started to drink and smoke, and eventually developed substance abuse-related issues.

The issues continued after aging out of foster care, and Stillwell would go on to be arrested on multiple occasions before turning 21.

However, with help from a program that assists at-risk 14- to 24-year-olds in developing life skills, Stillwell has been set on turning his life around.

PREVENTION IS THE GOAL

With the help of funding from the county, Ithaca City Treatment Courts and the United Way T. Merrell Shipherd Fund, at-risk youths now have access to preventative services to stay on the path to a healthy adulthood through the Learning Web, which is rooted in youth outreach.

The Learning Web now wants more

resources to devote to preventing homelessness among youth. Before the creation of the Life Skills program, Ryan Wilcox, Program Coordinator, did not work with youths who aged out of foster care, but she noticed there was a problem.

Stillwell was an example of what Wilcox first met Stillwell when he was 15 and in foster care. She made contact with him when he returned to his mother and since then she has made decisions that landed him in treatment court.

"They were aging out, but they were unable to work with them," she said. "They had significant mental health factors and barriers, but not a place to go. I still knew we had to help them, and that's why we applied for grants."

PROVIDING INDIVIDUAL & INTENSIVE CARE



Building Capacity

provides career help to youths, young adults

Upon entering the Life Skills program, each youth is matched with a case manager. The case manager meets with each member to do a life skills assessment that asks questions related to topics like grocery shopping or how often a person showers.

The case manager also will assess risks and create a personalized plan to provide the individual with training, support and mentorship to meet developmental and independence goals. Six months after the life skills assessment, the youth and the case manager will have another meeting to determine how much the participant has improved his or her skills.

“What’s neat about the program is that we get to meet and identify what people need for support, we create connections and we help get them where they need to be,” Wilcox said.

“We are creating social capital and connections with our people,” said Neoma Mullens, Executive Director of the Learning Web. “We are broadening the network so people have similar opportunities.” “There are a lot of supportive programs in Ithaca, but there is not one that is as inclusive as ours in working with young people to make something better of themselves,” Wilcox said.

GETTING ON THE RIGHT PATH

Having had parents who have had substance abuse issues, Stillwell had many different living

arrangements throughout his life. When he was younger, Stillwell was in respite foster care, then he went to respite care at the William George Agency for Children’s Services, before going to his aunt for foster care.

Now, Stillwell has been in a drug court treatment program for four months, attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, has a new job, is working with the Learning Web to attain housing, and is trying to gain custody of his 2-year-old son, Ashton. Currently, the parents of the mother of Ashton are his guardians.

“This is the longest time I’ve been sober, and it feels good,” Stillwell said. “Feeling sober is like using all the drugs in the world.”

Stillwell also is creating other goals for himself.

“Hopefully, I land a nice job somewhere or I start my own business,” Stillwell said.

“Everyday, I realize I’m blessed for something. God blesses me. Now that I meet Ryan, I’m glad to have her in my arsenal.”

Stillwell said he would either like to own a personal training business or a cleaning business, and has shown interest in becoming a peer alcohol counselor.

“Chuck had trouble with sobriety, but now has flourished,” Wilcox said. “He is staying away from trouble. He’s come a long way. He has come from not seeing his son to now regularly seeing his son. And he is learning skills to be a good parent. To be a full-time parent is his goal.”



The 2019 Independent Living Survey (ILS5) is an innovative participatory research model that engages formerly homeless Learning Web Youth Outreach Program participants as research assistants (pictured above reviewing data) to determine the nature and scope of youth homelessness in Tompkins County. Administered every 4 years since 2004, the ILS provides critical information leading to increased community awareness and system level change.

ILS5 findings!

HOUSING— VOLATILE & DANGEROUS

On average, respondents reported that they were 14 years old when things at home began to get rough and that they were 9 years old when they first needed to find other places to stay because they couldn’t or, didn’t want to go home.

Survey respondents reported staying in 2 different places (in friends’ houses, apartments, or rooms) in the past week with a range from 1 to 8 places.

In their current living situation, the majority (52%) of respondents only felt safe some of the time. While 38% felt safe all of the time and 7% felt safe none of the time.

UNEMPLOYED & UNDEREMPLOYED

66% of respondents were unemployed and of those who had jobs, only 10% worked 30-40 hours per week; 14% working 20-30 hours per week; 6% working 10-20 hours per week, and 4% working less than 10 hours per week.

40% of unemployed youth had been looking for work for over a month and 20% had been searching for over 6 months.

TO VIEW THE FULL ILS5 REPORT, VISIT OUR WEBSITE



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Just the Ticket—



“I decided that there are a lot of things in the community that I’d be interested in trying and learning about and this would be a great opportunity to do that.”

For Raia Gutman, her apprenticeship with the Hangar’s Kiddstuff productions was a first step in checking out her broad range of interests. Raia really enjoys seeing theater from both perspectives, watching the Director watch the show and conversely the kids watching the show. As far as the future and theater for Raia, “I don’t think I want to do this as a career but I do think it’d really be fun to do it on the side as an adult.” She definitely recommends apprenticeship to her peers, “Go for it and really choose something you want to know more about and that you’d be interested in trying and spending a lot of time doing it.”

Raia’s mom, Wendy Gutman (pictured here with Raia) values The Learning Web’s emphasis on youth voice and choice, “it’s really important for a child to have a voice and experience what they’re interested in. Raia is really invested in this and she chose it, you guys talked about it together and she was able to express her preference and now it’s all hers— I just give her a ride!”



The Sky’s the Limit—

When it comes to connecting young people with folks, who share their wide-ranging passions, Learning Web staff pull out all the stops. Take a glimpse at a sampling of the exploration areas that Learning Web youth have checked out this past year: pollinator resources and beekeeping, architecture, acupuncture, engineering, physical therapy, local government, cooking, veterinary science, banking, media & arts, aquaponics, emergency medicine, interior design, firefighting, sports radio, law, education, pharmacology, geriatric care, sewing & clothing design, landscaping, dentistry, entrepreneurship, fashion design & retail, sound production, agronomy. . .



Middle-school summer service group members got creative at Ability in Bloom (@abilityinbloom), a program of Challenge Workforce Solutions that helps its clients learn job skills while offering beautiful cut flowers to our community.

It was one of many great service sites that this energetic crew visited—they learned a lot about our community’s needs and how they can help!

SERVING TOMPKINS COUNTY SINCE 1972

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