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Unleashing Youth Creativity in Times of COVID: Reflections from a Collaborative Research Project

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ABSTRACT

Creativity during the COVID-19 crisis became a lifeline for youth who otherwise would have been disconnected and isolated due to policies that impaired their ability to connect with their communities and each other. Confident Futures, a collaborative research program, observed and collaborated with nine community organizations in New York City and Amsterdam to learn from youth workers who became (re)activated, engaged, and innovative with each other during this public health crisis. This paper reflects on the ethnographic learnings from this effort during the global pandemic, which revealed how long-standing community youth organizations in cities across the Atlantic cultivated *essential* supportive networks. They also employed creative resources that strengthened young people's ability to withstand the familiar impacts of structural violence. Our research sought to "capture the magic" of how and why youth can thrive despite the oppressive forces that shape them daily.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Confident Futures's collaborative research program studied nine New York and Amsterdam organizations during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Each group's mission aims to serve youth and their communities by developing leadership, offering social support, and providing space to engage in ongoing community organizing efforts. All demonstrated an innovative capacity to support, collaborate, and connect with the shared issues that impacted their worlds. Youth who live in poverty can feel economically and socially marginalized. Social distancing made many feel even more disconnected during the public health crisis. However, this study revealed that young people organized and deployed creativity to enhance their lives and communities despite the policies that kept them physically apart.

KEYWORDS

Creativity; youth;
community organizing;
covid-19

In response to the countless and unprecedented challenges they endured from the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 and multiple crises after that, this essay describes how youth workers in disrupted, discriminated, and low-income neighborhoods embraced creativity as a source of well-being, expression, and even as a source of survival. We drew our data and observations from an ongoing study, Confident Futures, a collaborative research endeavor between nine community organizations in New York City and Amsterdam.

Confident Futures developed a program intended to discover how long-standing community youth

organizations in cities across the Atlantic have built supportive networks and activities and employed resources that strengthened youth's ability to withstand the cruel assaults of poverty, racism, and the violence they too experience at the hand of police and the socioeconomic forces of gentrification.

Health and social workers often portray low-income youth as marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, class, and/or migrant status through their pathologies, gearing interventions toward "at risk" and "disadvantage." Instead, Confident Futures—inspired by a positive health approach

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defining people’s “ability to adapt and self-manage in the face of social, physical, and emotional challenges” (Huber et al. 2011, p7)—focuses on what youth workers do in their locally-based practices, to support youth aspirations for health, happiness, safety, and well-being. The overall goal of the Confident Futures project¹ was to offer accounts of why youth projects succeed (or not). More specifically, we aimed to identify confident futures mechanisms and techniques. This essay describes how creativity emerged as a critical confident futures mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the art techniques used to unleash creativity.

The Confident Futures project collaborates with youth workers from nine carefully selected organizations (chosen for their diversity in approaches and reputation of success) who work with young people forging own lives in low-income, marginalized, and disrupted communities (see Table 1).

The young people served by these community-based organizations (CBOs) already face many challenges in their everyday lives due to the

inherited social and economic marginalization commonplace within immigrant and racialized communities. Navigating a world that is often hostile to expressions of resistance by youth can be overwhelming.

We collaboratively studied how the initiatives of the nine organizations reframe problems in locally actionable terms to engage youth, helping them toward confidence. We conducted participatory research, including focus groups and ethnographic interviews, participated in events of the youth organizations, and facilitated exchange visits (the groups from Amsterdam visited those in New York and vice versa) – the contrasts between the cities helped identify confident future mechanisms.

More specifically, we trained (and compensated) youth workers and/or alums of our partner community youth programs to be community research fellows, a role in which they participate and observe, interview, and interpret ongoing activities of the nine CBOs. Usually, they have already experienced the mentoring, education and employment support, and health resources these organizations use to promote youth well-being through sports,

Table 1. Nine collaborating youth organizations.

| Organizations | Programs & activities |
|---|--|
| Lower Eastside Girls Club (LESGC) | New York City LESGC runs programs that serve girls and young women throughout New York’s five boroughs, providing a full-service arts, science, and civic engagement Centre for the Community. See: https://www.girlsclub.org/ |
| Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) | WHEDco is a community development organization with a mission “to give the South Bronx access to all the resources that create thriving neighborhoods: from high-quality early education and after-school programs to fresh, healthy food, cultural programming, and economic opportunity.” See: https://whedco.org |
| Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy | Ifetayo offers African-centered, multi-disciplinary arts & cultural education and wrap-around support for the whole family. As a leading Brooklyn-based institution, Ifetayo empowers youth and families of African descent to achieve high levels of professional and artistic education excellence. See: https://ifetayo.org |
| Perfect City / The Catcalling Project | Perfect City is an art and advocacy working group on NYC’s Lower East Side. The Catcalling Project researches the relationship between catcalling and gentrification using mapping exercises about belonging and avoidance. See: https://perfectcity.org/ |
| Rambler Studios | Amsterdam Rambler Studios is a creative studio and social enterprise empowering young talents to design their life through fashion. A place in Amsterdam based for creative expression, skill development, and personal exploration. See: https://ramblerstudios.com/ |
| IZI Solutions | IZI Solutions is an Amsterdam-based social innovation agency fighting against racial and social inequality and works towards a righteous and equal society in which the diversity of every individual is respected and appreciated. See: https://www.izi-solutions.com/ |
| E lance Academy | E lance is a coaching academy for girls and young women from 10 to 32 years old. Through various peer-support programs, E lance trains them to become solid and ambitious women and role models for the next generation. See: https://www.elanceacademy.nl/ |
| Ara Cora | Ara Cora was founded in 2008 to strengthen personal development and the social position of Amsterdam, New West. The core of Ara Cora’s approach is to reach young people through sports (in particular soccer) and other games and further engage through group gatherings and individual guidance. See: https://aracora.nl/ |
| GirlsConnect | GirlsConnect provides soccer training for girls aged 10 to 13 and 14 to 30, including a tailor-made training program for the latter addressing concerns such as sexuality, identity, self-confidence, and social media. This program is now called El Mazouni Coaching & Sportbegeleiding: https://www.facebook.com/elmazouni.coaching |

the arts, and other after-school activities. Early career ethnographers worked with the community fellows in each city to further articulate the mechanisms through which these non-profit organizations support youth in marginalized conditions.

Although we began our transatlantic collaborative inquiry in the spring of 2019, the COVID pandemic quickly disrupted our work. New York became a global epicenter by early spring 2020, and Amsterdam experienced its version of lockdowns and social unrest. Along with literally millions and millions of others throughout the world, the youth organizations were swiftly thrown into the jaws of the global pandemic, having to shut down, reimagine, and reorganize their projects in the face of impending infection, infirmity, and death in all the communities where we had forged partnerships. And we, the ethnographic researchers, had to adapt too.

When asked, in our first virtual session in Spring 2020, how the youth workers and community research fellows had experienced the first two months of what became years of intermittent lockdowns, a variety of responses were shared, including “tired,” “chaotic,” “hectic,” “difficult,” and “emotional rollercoaster.” Despite the dire circumstances and losses incurred because of this devastating virus, all the youth workers with whom we were conducting research quickly pivoted to online action while providing resources for their participants who were also coping with harrowing illness and deaths in their families.

At first, shaken by these experiences, we discovered that although the pandemic objectively limited social life in many ways, it enabled new possibilities for collaborative projects to come to fruition online. No longer bound by time and space restraints, our partner organizations used the pandemic to cultivate old and new working relationships virtually in ways that were not possible before. They highlighted creativity and flexibility at a speed that we often found breathtaking; inspired, we did the same.

Creativity emerged as the most critical “positive learning experience” in the first virtual meetup we organized for the youth workers and community research fellows. In our first newsletter, we called for contributions on the theme (see [Figures 1 and 2](#)).

This paper describes the arts projects our collaborators set up to unleash creativity and support emotional well-being during COVID-19. We show how the initiatives allowed youth to share their lived experience, connect to their culture, imagine collective futures, and develop new artistic skills potentially mobilized to generate income.

Before COVID-19, all the collaborating CBOs’ programs centered around direct face-to-face engagements. Many organizations have integrated arts activities into their programs, including theatre, media projects, creative mapping, and fashion design – highly appreciated activities by participating youth. Others have found similar outcomes in arts based activities (Poyntz et al 2023; Campbell 2019).

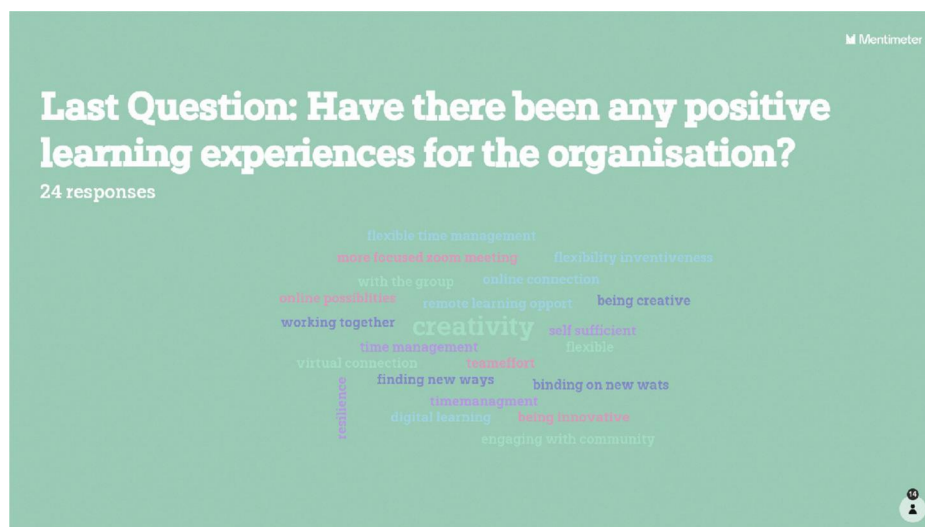


Figure 1. Creativity/being creative was mentioned as a positive learning experience in the first virtual meeting during the first lockdown, which had 33 participants.



Figure 2. Creativity newsletter with contributions from all youth organizations and designed by first author Melissa Maldonado-Salcedo.

Due to extended lockdowns in New York City and Amsterdam, everyday life was put on pause and it became painfully clear that many young people would be exposed to amplified stressors resulting from the perils of being socially distanced from each other and the communities that give them a sense of belonging. Aware of these circumstances, the youth workers in this study immediately kicked into action, finding innovative ways to adjust their arts programs. They organized online programs through which young people could express their concerns, examine their roots, imagine better futures, and develop artistic skills that could generate future income. Below, we discuss how four participating organizations unleashed creativity and how their actions affected young people in marginalized communities badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Connecting through collaborative arts practices

Before COVID-19, Perfect City in New York developed “Avoidance Mapping” as a creative design and method to examine everyday challenges faced in low-income communities. People in the organization taught community members, especially girls and women, how to draw and expose micro-analyses of safe and unsafe spaces

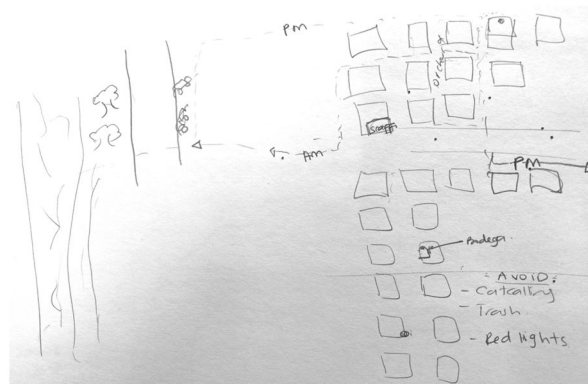


Figure 3. Avoidance mapping morning and evening routes and un/safe spaces (the Catcalling Project).

and their time usage in their immediate community (see Figure 3). They labeled their work “The Catcalling Project.” Perfect City intended to use the avoidance maps to advocate for a safer built environment (see Figure 4). Collaborative practices of avoidance mapping encouraged participants to articulate their concerns and imagine safer futures while maintaining community through collaborative acts of drawing the maps.

As Aaron, the instigator of Perfect City, explained, “The Catcalling Project came out of both a need and a frustration. There is a need to improve how the city operates for women and femme-identifying people regarding safety.” Group members were frustrated that, up until



Figure 4. Still from an avoidance mapping animation made by Ewan Creed (the Catcalling Project).

Tiffany and Jahmorei started The Catcalling Project, men in the group had been driving most of the work without enough input from the women in the group. The Catcalling Project responded to the frustrations and the need.

Tiffany, a community research fellow and youth worker at Perfect City, explained that when COVID hit, she felt compelled to reach out to those who might not know how to ask for help and might be accustomed to pretending that everything was fine. Perfect City decided to remotely allow people to engage with mapping exercises individually or as a family. The Catcalling Project prioritized support for survivors of domestic violence at the shelter they worked with, knowing that the women and their children were at higher risk of feeling further isolated during this uncertain time. Tiffany explained that the women residing in the shelter were forced to “avoid” all that could potentially track and expose their whereabouts. Therefore, many women who lived at the shelter, understandably felt unsafe using Zoom and phones to stay in touch. Tiffany and Catcalling Project co-founder, Jahmorei, creatively anticipated that shelter residents would face challenges in practicing self-care given the difficulties of anchoring themselves in the moment. These considerations and practices of anticipatory resilience served as an essential protective mechanism.

These women, who were survivors of domestic violence, already lived in fear due to the numerous uncertainties surrounding their safety, housing, and livelihoods—many lost connections to their support networks and communities. The pandemic and the subsequent need for social distancing put them at risk of completely disconnecting. The care packages provided by the young women activists from The Catcalling Project offered tools and resources to practice feeling grounded, learn new ways to find comfort, and be reminded that they were not forgotten or alone. Tiffany noted that the prepared care packages included art supplies such as masks and gloves. They hoped to help the women and their families look after themselves by nurturing artistic production. Reflecting on the creative engagement during COVID, Jahmorei shared, “The work gave me a feeling of empowerment and centered me when everything was spiraling out of control.” She realized that she could rely on the “trust and reputation” she already built within the community. The community trusted her (and the organization) when everyone and everything else felt very risky.

Aware of the stresses involved in youth work, Perfect City/The Catcalling Project started a Summer Reading Club with Abrons Arts Center over Zoom to open “a space for youth workers

doing similar work or who want to connect to keep important conversations going.” Jahmorei shared that the virtual book club helped them to gain more insight on how to “prevent stress, and violence against women, and other forms of harassment for marginalized groups in the city.” The summer book club enhanced their overall work. In fact, it served many purposes, such as checking in with each other and ensuring they had a space to breathe while also raising awareness of potential “burnout.” To stay “creative” as youth activists, they expressed a need to maintain virtual spaces of engagement and exchange in order to work through the disorienting challenges of the times, including the horrors of the rampant police brutality, anti-blackness, and civil unrest. They knew that the psychological experiences that they now confronted were even more distressfully challenging if they faced them alone.

Centering on cultural identity

Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by leaning into their organization’s foundational strengths. They understood that things could feel worse for their community if they were already bad in the “before times.” Therefore, they optimized their programming online to stay “physically distant but socially connected.” Ifetayo mission to serve youth and their families of African descent who are often disconnected from many systems or feel discriminated by them. Hence, to mitigate these circumstances, Ifetayo sought to offer hope and community engagement by further accentuating their core values (*Kijumla*, *Ubuntu*, *Ifetayo*, *Mbongi*, and *Sankofa*²) and they shared and supported their community by offering them a series of online mental health workshops that centered on “resiliency” and “identity.” They took the life experiences, history, and traditions of African people as the starting point of one’s being in the world. This became key for Ifetayo participants, whose lives were upended not only by COVID limitations but also by the images and stories of unchecked police brutality and anti-black violence from the murder of Breanna Taylor, George Floyd, Jacob Blake, and the countless other

names that continue to be added to the endless list of victims of police violence.

Before the pandemic, Ifetayo’s programming was challenged by difficulties finding physical spaces to offer their programs in one of the world’s most expensive cities. The organization had moved from home to home across Brooklyn neighborhoods, securing transient spaces in public schools. This longstanding constraint was why the leadership joined an initiative to set up a community health and wellness center in the old Crown Heights Armory. During a hybrid Confidence Futures conference held June 2021 in Amsterdam, during a temporary easing of lockdown measures, Naima, then the Executive Director of Ifetayo, shared gorgeous designs of their new space and the philosophy informing their creative production. She engaged students from a local university to design the future premises, encouraging them to draw inspiration from African mud architecture, wood carvings, and patterned textiles, see [Figure 3](#). She invited them to consider color, texture, and movement throughout the place to create a welcoming atmosphere. The new building was intended to center on the rich history of African identity - including handmade spaces with a nod to traditional forms and fabrications of African architecture and texture ([Figure 5](#)). The aim was for light and color to dance together with students and elders of Ifetayo. While COVID-19 delayed the realization of this immensely creative vision, it did not derail it. By the summer of 2022, Ifetayo had finally moved into its permanent premises, the design of which amazed us all. See [Figure 6](#), showing Naima welcoming us below a beautiful lampshade. It was a fantastic lockdown achievement. Ifetayo’s programs remain vibrant and expanding.

Expressing concerns through online platforms and performative arts

Amsterdam-based Ara Cora maintains a community center that promotes many activities, including soccer training and tournaments, within an “outer borough” which was also a predominantly immigrant enclave. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Ara Cora’s youth workers decided to



Figures 5 and 6. Inspiration for and the design of the new Ifetayo premises in the Mayor R. Owens Health and Wellness Centre and Director Naima welcoming Confident Future participants to the Ifetayo premises in October 2024, during the 2nd exchange visit to New York.



Figure 7. Still from the Lab6 Vodcast, Episode 6 (<https://lab6.amsterdam/>).

launch a new vodcast platform for their community. This creative media platform for youth aimed to create a place for them to express themselves and share feelings about the pandemic-inflected world. Abid, an Ara Cora youth organizer, pointed out that making and airing the vlog preserved and enhanced relationality in a time when disconnection and misunderstandings pervaded so much of young people's everyday lives. The collaborative creative process cultivated trust in their capacity to successfully navigate interpersonal challenges as a community, and it was fun!

The conversations on this particular platform centered on topics and current events that, by and large, were ignored by mainstream media but that still impacted young people. With Abid as host and together with a diverse range of representatives of agencies and positive role models, the different topics were covered in an informal tone but with optimal quality. In the first episode, Dutch actor Aziz Akazim and the Head of local neighborhood police, Mourad Chejjar, discussed how to stay active and connected,

especially during the upcoming month of Ramadan, while also staying out of trouble and following lockdown regulations. Other episodes examined topics such as vaccinations among young people, providing shelter for vulnerable youth, online safety and social media, unequal opportunities in the education system (*kansongelijkheid*), and nutrition during Ramadan.

By creating a Vodcast, Ara Cora amplified the voices of young people, influencing the social policy and outreach of professionals who too often misunderstand or stereotype them. Recognizing the significance of this work, service providers and even the police turned to Ara Cora to enhance channels of communication with youth in immigrant communities (Figure 7).

In the same neighborhood GirlsConnect organized soccer training for girls aged 10 to 13 and 14 to 30. For the latter, they also created a tailor-made training program addressing shared concerns on topics related to sexuality, identity, self-confidence, and social media. The training moved to less private spaces outdoors where the



Figure 8. Scenes from the “Lost Words” theatre performance by GirlsConnect.

girls began to move freely despite being more public and watched by others in the community when they were no longer able to organize soccer training indoors because of COVID-19.

During the summer of 2021, lockdown measures were momentarily eased, and the youth workers seized the opportunity by organizing a summer song, theatre, and spoken word program where the girls could showcase their creative talents. Eight girls from Amsterdam, New West, presented “Lost Words” at their local community center under the evening’s invitation to explore Self Love, Sexuality, Vulnerability, and Being yourself in dance, song, theatre, and spoken word.

The girls showcased their creative talents and provided a look into their lives. In collaboration with professionals from a theatrical debate group called “Lost Project,” the girls shared a performance with personal and vulnerable stories about menstruation and resisted its taboo status. Fathers in the audience also openly shared about their experiences in raising daughters, and other men shared their vision with us as future fathers, hoping to teach their sons that they can be vulnerable and to raise their daughters to be confident women.

The performance became an evening filled with positive energy and open respect for one another. The girls and professionals creatively designed and planned the evening after only four sessions as they got to know each other, shared and chose the topics important to their lives, and created dance, song, theatre, and spoken word pieces together. The girls had a fantastic time, and it was a beautiful start to a creative and empowering project intended to move forward. GirlsConnect seeks to

give girls a voice and a stage for more parents and professionals to become involved. The motto of the collaboration was “Together we make this city, and together we give our girls a voice.” Below, [Figure 8](#) shows a scene from the “Lost Words” theatre performance.

Designing your life across the Atlantic

COVID-19 was incredibly challenging for our Amsterdam research partner, Rambler Studios, a platform for empowering young, talented creatives to design their lives through street fashion. They offer young people, often labeled “disconnected” and confronted by substantial structural and cultural challenges, opportunities to develop their creative talents. As Ramblers, they are coached to find and fulfill their aspirations in selling fashion, which they design from plan through production and down to runway and commercialization. Rambler coaches reached out to their youth designers during the pandemic by providing them with art kits to keep them “creating” and “designing their lives” (DYL). They did not know if and when they would be together in the studio again. Carmen, founder and Creative Director, was responsible for the design program at Rambler Studios. She recalls how creating art during times of crisis allowed young people to discern, discover, and deduce reality on their terms. As soon as possible, Rambler Studios modified their studio to meet social distancing guidelines and invited their designers back, as described in Roels et al. (Roels et al., 2022).

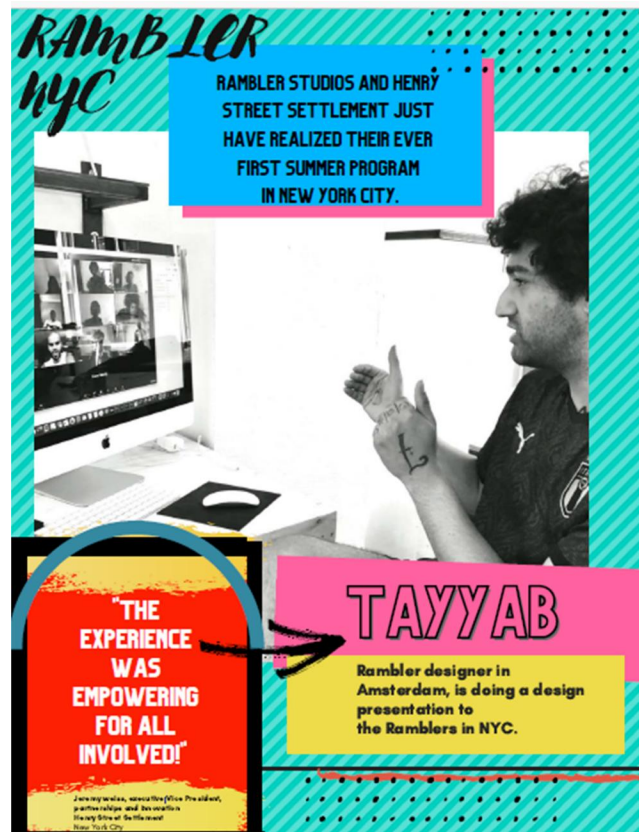


Figure 9. The first exchange between Ramblers in Amsterdam and Ramblers in New York was featured in the *Confident Futures* newsletter for the summer of 2020.

The pandemic was a hectic time for Rambler Studios organizers. Not only did they foster the creativity of Ramblers in Amsterdam, but also of Ramblers in New York City through their collaboration with Henry Street Settlement, Rambler's NYC partner since 2013. The relationship between Rambler Studios in Amsterdam and Henry Street Settlement was already in its planning stages when the Dutch group joined our *Confident Futures* team. Carmen recalled the May 2019 kick-off meeting in New York. This event turbo-charged a kickoff program that allowed both parties to move forward with their longstanding ambition to launch a Rambler Studios NYC. After working hard to secure modest funding on both sides, they ran their initial online first NYC Rambler summer program in 2020, see [Figure 9](#).

Since the first online session, this exchange program has flourished as a yearly summer program in New York City. NYC Ramblers share a year-round sewing studio with other Henry Street Settlement programs. Jeremy Reiss, Henry Street's Executive Vice President for Partnerships and

Innovation, is committed to developing and supporting the program as an ongoing career training studio for youth aspiring to enter the fashion industry. Like Rambler Studios in Amsterdam, the New York program is fast evolving; it is a space for developing creative skills within Henry Street Settlement's wide-ranging mission.

Jeremy told us that the intention to organize this partnership had been in the works for many years. Nevertheless, it was, in fact, the particularities of this pandemic-transformed year that made it all possible. Henry Street, faced with cancellation due to health measures of COVID-19, had to innovate to continue offering youth summer employment services. They knew that cutting the program would inevitably contribute to further disconnection among the young people they serve.

Henry Street Settlement has offered summer employment programs for youth since 1963, providing income-generating opportunities and other less tangible benefits like the pride, purpose, and professional development that comes with paid

work. COVID-19 made it impossible to move forward with business as usual in 2020, but remote programming made it possible to restore this option innovatively. The NYC Rambler program's first cohort consisted of 10 students. Jeremy highlighted that the experience of launching this program and turning their vision into results was "empowering for all involved." This targeted programming also aims to reduce stress and provide a sense of control when the rest of the world feels like it is falling apart. Rambler's and Henry Street's first program collaboration taught fashion design virtually as part of a city-funded workforce development program Henry Street offers to "disconnected youth" throughout the summer months.

While this online venture emerged as a response to COVID-19, it demonstrates how creativity can be integral to professional development. Fashion design can be monetized, and it is an achievable aspiration for many talented young people. They can use their "street culture" expertise to creatively "design your life," Rambler's motto. The cross-cultural exchange afforded by the Rambler-Henry Street project provides New York-based participants with new creativity skills that will eventually enable them to search for creative employment opportunities.

The creativity of the hustle

Economically and socially, marginalized communities manage to survive despite having countless barriers to health and wealth. In many ways, this hustle requires an extraordinary amount of creativity. Young people are constantly evolving, adapting, and navigating through many worlds at a time when they have limited access to adequate resources as do the youth workers that serve them too. Creativity is an engine of transformative change, stress relief, and emotional well-being as evidenced in the collaborative artistic efforts that emerged during lockdown.

In this article we demonstrate how youth workers unleashed creativity during the COVID pandemic by being quick on their feet, adapting programs when needed, and seizing opportunities as they emerged. Immersed in the communities that they serve, their work reflects incredible

ingenuity and capacity to respond meaningfully to the needs of their community. Youth workers who are used to working "outside of the box" know that ground-breaking ideas and opportunities are inextricable from the effort and energy that brings them to fruition. Working through bureaucratic difficulties and financial constraints has always been at the core of their organizations.

By supporting youth through collaborative arts practices, by inviting them to creatively express their concerns through theatre and online videos, by imagining new premises for their organization, by learning new skills, youth workers stayed in touch with other young people and enhanced ability to see beyond their immediate circumstances which presented a significant risk to their everyday lives (Zimmerman 2000). At the same time, community youth organizers and research fellows experienced empowerment with a renewed sense of purpose as they designed and accomplished creative action that helped overcome difficult emotions, stressors, and circumstances.

Acts of creativity can be grand and inspiring, such as creating a welcoming building or an award-winning fashion outfit. They can also be more mundane, such as sketching avoidance maps of one's everyday experience, checking in during online meetups, or reading and talking about a book together. By unleashing creative potential in many different ways, and through many different media the youth workers and their young mentees moved on to create change and more confident futures. The impact of their work is immense. Post-pandemic, the world realized how severely youth (including more privileged ones) were affected by the lockdowns. High levels of clinical depression, anxiety, and loneliness were reported among Australian youth (Bell et al. 2023), increased depressive symptoms among adolescents and youth in Kenya (Gichangi et al. 2023), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among youth in China (Liang et al., 2020). In the US, a federal survey of teen health found 1 in 5 adolescents reported symptoms of anxiety or depression while at the same time there was a lack of needed mental health therapy or counseling (Kaiser Family Foundation 2024). In the Netherlands, young people reported missing out on critical stages of their lives and that the social isolation

and disconnect from friends inevitably lead to significant social unease (RIVM 2023). Those served by the youth organizations that we collaborated with are an exception. They remain capable to see beyond the crises before them and imagine better futures despite them. We cede the last word to Rambler's social media, where their vision and work are described as a constant lifeline: "Creativity got us through 2020."

Plain language summary

The Confident Futures project brought together medical anthropologists, non-profit organizations and young community researchers in New York City and Amsterdam to explore their organization and community-based best practices toward ensuring successful and healthy futures for youth in their communities, broadly defined. The project was envisioned and implemented as a collaborative process in which anthropologists worked alongside young community researchers, who themselves were also often beneficiaries of their organizations' programs in order to develop the methodological tools necessary to conduct participant observation and interviews with their peers and community organization leaders. As native anthropologists the community researchers identified the importance of building connections and long-term relationships with community leaders, families, local government and across organizations in New York City and Amsterdam as key components in the development of community resilience. We highlight the importance of these connections to trusted mentors and note how the Confident Futures team valued and deepened their own connections through their collective work and emphasis on the centrality of life-affirming techniques. We argue that these Confident Futures partners build connections that promote youth well-being, and create a space where it becomes possible to build programs that envision larger policy change surrounding youth development.

Notes on contributors

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Rayna Rapp is a Professor Emerita of Anthropology at New York University. Specializing in Gender, reproduction, health and culture, science and technology, and disability, in the United States and Europe. She is the author of the award-winning book "Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America (1999)" and co-author of the new book "Disability Worlds."

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Notes

1. This project received ethical approval from the AISSR Ethics Advisory Board in Amsterdam and NYU Institutional Review Board in New York City, as well as informed verbal consent from all research participants during the ethnography research.

2. See the Ifetayo website for more details on their values: <https://ifetayo.org/about-us/>.

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