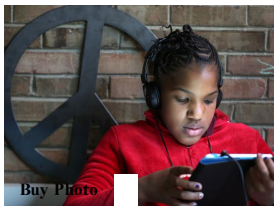


Our Children: Indy kids find peace at MLK Center

Maureen C. Gilmer, maureen.gilmer@indystar.com 6 a.m. EST December 4, 2016

Community center builds on King's legacy to establish a culture of peace



(Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar)

You can look into the children's eyes and almost see their dreams. Dreams for peace, kindness, a fighting chance.

Eleven-year-old Damya Lee has a dream: "that nothing bad's going to happen."

Damya lives in a community where bad things do happen. Every day. Maybe not always bad enough to make the headlines, but often quiet tragedies that leave families frayed, divided. Addiction, crime and hopelessness are familiar neighbors here.

But in the middle of it all is the [Martin Luther King Center \(http://mlkcenterindy.org/\)](http://mlkcenterindy.org/), 40 W. 40th St., a place of hope, possibility and peace named for the civil rights leader who shared his own dreams for a better world.

Damya and other children who come to the north-side community center after school helped decorate its new Peace Room, a onetime conference room that has new life as a place for students and staff to read and meditate. A counselor from Christian Theological Seminary sometimes uses the space to work with children who are dealing with trouble at home or school. But most of all, the kids come in with the idea that they can let down their guard.

"I can come in here, take a deep breath and relax," Damya said.



Damya Lee, 11, finds peace and relaxation at the Martin Luther King Community Center's Peace Room. The center is nestled in the middle of one of IMPD's targeted high-crime neighborhoods. (Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar)

That's exactly what center director Allison Luthe wants to see.

"We've dedicated this as the no-drama zone," said Luthe, who saw the need for a peaceful space not long after joining the center's leadership team last year.

"Our kids don't have a lot of conflict resolution skills," she said. "We have a lot of bullying: in our program, in the neighborhood, in the schools. We don't encourage each other, and too often it's not a safe place to make mistakes or ask questions, at least in their minds."

The Peace Room is designed to be that safe place, "where it's OK to say, 'I need a minute.' They don't get a lot of permission to do that without getting in trouble," Luthe said.

The room is furnished with beanbag chairs, books, art and a peace tree, a gift from the Indianapolis Museum of Art. On it, hanging like ornaments on a Christmas tree, are wishes for peace and love, and yes, one for an Xbox 360 game system, all placed there by children and parents, staff and supporters. Look up and you'll see ceiling tiles decorated in bright yellows, reds, greens and blues — messages of hope created by the kids who gather here.



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Youth don't need permission to come into the room, though homework must be finished first. Volunteers from Meridian Street United Methodist Church, Butler University, Cathedral High School and Brebeuf Jesuit Preparatory School come in regularly to help with homework and to work with students on reading.

Most of the 25 kids who participate in the after-school program at MLK come from nearby IPS School 43. Shuttle buses pick up the kids at school and deposit them at the center. On a recent Tuesday, a stream of children came in, laughing and joking about zombies. One little girl made a beeline for Luthe, who was sitting at a table talking with a guest. The girl wrapped her arms around Luthe in greeting.

The gesture wasn't lost on Kim Boyd, MLK's neighborhood and family advocate. She has watched as violence close to home, including the [fatal shooting of a 10-year-old boy \(/story/news/crime/2015/11/25/deshaun-swansons-death-what-we-know/76371374/\)](#) last year, has eaten away at the fabric of the community.

"Communication is hard for adults, and for our children, it's even harder," Boyd said. "How do they emotionally and verbally express their feelings when they've lost a parent to incarceration or a family member to violence or addiction?"

"Allison has established a foundation of trust here; you saw it yourself," she added. "These are her children. Any time a child comes up and hugs you in front of a stranger, there's got to be a comfort zone. That was a statement."

And that's what the center is working to replicate with other children, parents and families in the neighborhood.

Luthe recalls a sixth-grade boy who was considered a jokester, always happy and outgoing. One day, he came in and was crying, mourning the loss of an uncle to violence. There was no Peace Room then, but a quiet space would have been a perfect spot to process his grief, she said.

Peace in the MLK Community

"A lot of people have violence in their family. It just heightens the tension," she said. "All the more reason we need a place like this."

The area served by the MLK Center includes Butler-Tarkington, Crown Hill and surrounding neighborhoods. It's racially mixed, but the center is in the middle of one of Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department's six [targeted high-crime areas \(/story/news/crime/2014/10/09/mayor-ballard-impd-to-focus-on-crime-prevention-in-six-indianapolis-area-neighborhoods/16979317/\)](#), with overall higher rates of homicide, shootings, police incidents and drug overdoses.



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[\(http://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/suzette-hackney/2016/01/16/hackney-honoring-kings-legacy-action/78896354/\)](http://www.indystar.com/story/opinion/columnists/suzette-hackney/2016/01/16/hackney-honoring-kings-legacy-action/78896354/)

[A \\$75,000 grant from the Indianapolis Foundation \(https://www.cicf.org/2016/09/22/indianapolis-foundation-awards-1-86-million-tackle-crime-marion-county/?utm_source=CisionPR&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=CPCG2016&utm_content=Community+Crime+Prevention+Sept.+2016\)](https://www.cicf.org/2016/09/22/indianapolis-foundation-awards-1-86-million-tackle-crime-marion-county/?utm_source=CisionPR&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=CPCG2016&utm_content=Community+Crime+Prevention+Sept.+2016), an affiliate of Central Indiana Community Foundation, is dedicated to finding ways to combat that crime with job training and other support programs. This fall, the foundation awarded \$1.86 million to 42 community organizations in high-crime neighborhoods.

The center, which was forced to close for a short time in 2014 due to financial problems, gets about 25 percent of its funding from United Way, and the rest from grants, contributions and programming. For a minimum donation of \$5 a month, you can join the [MLK Dream Team \(https://crm.bloomerang.co/HostedDonation?ApiKey=pub_c9a98fc9-527d-11e5-aac9-0afe91f37681&WidgetId=690176\)](#) to help sustain the center's mission.

Luthe would like to expand the number of children in after-school care to 60, but says there are probably a couple hundred students from School 43 alone who could benefit.

"A lot of kids are just roaming the neighborhood," she said. "Last week, there were a couple boys knocking on the windows outside to get our attention."

Luthe and her staff try not to turn anyone away, but they also have to get parental permission. So they usually invite the kids in, then contact parents or guardians. Once the kids are in the door, the center works to strengthen ties with their families to introduce them to other services, including parental support, financial coaching, job training, utility assistance, job fairs, transportation, senior programming and a co-working space for fledgling businesses.

"We want to be that place where there's a place for everybody," Boyd said.

Ariel Starks is thrilled that there is a place here for her two daughters, ages 11 and 7. They first attended summer camp at the center, then enrolled in the after-school program this year.

"I don't have to worry about their care when they're there. I love it," the 41-year-old hospital worker said. "On top of that, they have so many programs that help me." The center helped Starks enroll in a program at IUPUI to train her for a new position in health care, which she believes will secure a better future for her family.

"I can't sing their praises enough."

Call *IndyStar* reporter Maureen Gilmer at (317) 444-6879. Follow her on Twitter: @MaureenCGilmer.

About Our Children and how can you help

The mission of IndyStar's Our Children (/ourchildren) campaign is to use the power of journalism to make a difference for our youths. We invite you to join us by not only making a financial contribution but also volunteering when possible.

IndyStar covers all fundraising and administrative costs, so every penny you contribute to Our Children goes directly to the agencies serving Central Indiana families and children in need. In addition, the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust will match up to \$25,000 in donations, making your contributions go even further.

Go to [indystar.com/OurChildren \(/OurChildren\)](http://indystar.com/OurChildren (/OurChildren)) to learn how to donate online and to read stories about work being done to help children in our community. If you prefer to send a check, please mail it to:

Central Indiana Community Foundation, Attn: Our Children, 615 N. Alabama St., Suite 119, Indianapolis, IN 46204

Martin Luther King Center Bizarre Bazaar

What: Fundraiser and community event featuring arts and crafts made by neighborhood residents and baked goods made by the center's children.

When: 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday.

Where: 40 W. 40th St.

Cost: Free, open to the public.

Info: (317) 923-4581 or [MLKCenterIndy.org \(http://mlkcenterindy.org/\)](http://MLKCenterIndy.org).

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