

## **Project Report**

January – December 2021

The Connecting Circles Collective (3C) is an initiative focusing on leadership development among African American women and girls. The Collective represents a collaboration between three locally recognized mentoring organizations: [Destiny's Daughters](#), the [Harriet Tubman Center](#), and [Iron Dresses](#). Each of these partner organizations has a proven track record of dedicated intergenerational equity work led by women of color. During 2021 the 3C Collective was sponsored through a grant from the JustPax fund. This Report tracks with the progress of 3C over that year, highlighting activities that align with the project's original goals and approach.

### **3C Goals:**

- Invest in the leadership development and empowerment of young women of color
- Engage in leadership coaching programming that is site-led and socially transformative
- Amplify the mentorship reach of locally recognized African American female leaders

### **3C Approach:**

- Engaging local stakeholders
- Considering racial equity impacts
- Examining root causes of oppression
- Investing in racial equity advancements
- Building into structural capacity for just outcomes

The following narrative provides reports from each of the Collective's three partner organizations describing their work and key deliverables during 2021.

### **Destiny's Daughters**

A key partner in 3C's work is Destiny's Daughters, a therapeutic Mentoring and Leadership Development program dedicated to the personal transformation, holistic development and self-empowerment of women and girls. Destiny's Daughters Inc. was established in Harlem, New York City at Seventh Avenue Mennonite Church in 1990 by Melody M. Pannell, a native of Harlem, minister, social worker, and activist who responded to the social disparities, racial injustices, and adverse childhood experiences of young women in her community. Destiny's Daughters centers the history, culture, and social experiences of BIPOC women, with a particular focus on the trajectory of African American young women and girls. Young women who are mentored through Destiny's Daughters are equipped to overcome social disparities, develop servant leadership skills, and build resilient communities as they engage in spiritual formation, restorative practices, and social justice advocacy.

During 2021 Destiny's Daughters inaugurated its *Transforming the Trajectory of Trauma for African American Girls: The Resiliency Project*. The goal of this project was to conduct a community mapping process through which historical/cultural trauma as well as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) could be tracked locally among segments of Harrisonburg's African American community. The study's younger participants (aged 3-7) were recruited from the historically African American Northeast Neighborhood of Harrisonburg. To engage this work, Destiny's Daughters forged connections with the following key persons and organizations: Angela Rouse (Executive Director of the Roberta Webb Child Care Center), Karen Thomas (Founder/President of the Northeast Neighborhood Association), and Seth Crissman (Immanuel Mennonite Church Kids Club leader). Two Destiny's Daughters interns also contributed to this work: Kiara Kiah (EMU), and Brittany Staton (JMU). Research findings aligned with national statistics that suggest that girls of color are more likely to experience ACE's at younger ages than their non-BIPOC compatriots.

To address the protracted trauma of ACE's and racial disparities among older girls and young women, during 2021 Destiny's Daughters engaged in the following activities:

- A free ACE assessment for all program participants
- Weekly online mentoring sessions held between February and May
- Emotional Emancipation Circles were provided for participants
- Personal (and racial) Identity and Leadership Development group sessions
- Therapeutic Mentoring (individual) sessions
- Trauma and resilience community psycho education (at schools)
- A parent/guardian educational support session

### **Harriet Tubman Center**

The mission of the Harriet Tubman Center is focused on promoting the legacy of Harriet Tubman through leadership development, by conducting cultural tours, and by promoting advocacy and research. Through these mediums the Harriet Tubman Center provides opportunity for engagement with a local site that recognizes and celebrates the legacy of an iconic African American female leader. This heritage site was originally built in 1908 as an annex to a one-room school for children. Amongst other things, the facility offers opportunities to actively engage with many elements of historic plantation history that have been predominately erased: slave patrols, auction blocks, hideouts, and the Freedom Trail. Leaders of the center also provide community members with education around contemporary racial justice issues in Harrisonburg and across the nation.

For members of the Harriet Tubman Center, the year began in tragedy due to the untimely passing of the Center's founder, the Rev. Stan Maclin. Family members of the Maclin household noted that they would like to specifically thank 3C and JustPax for recognizing their need to grieve whilst also providing ongoing funding during the dark days immediately following Rev. Maclin's homegoing. Having a sustaining community during this time has been key for them as a family, as well as being instrumental in bolstering the ongoing work of the Harriet Tubman Center over this time.

3C was able to support the Center during this time, partnering with them as they provided the following mentorship services during 2021:

- A 10-month Harriet Tubman leadership training class was conducted
- This service was provided for young women ages 5-17 on a weekly basis
- Class objectives were to learn about Tubman's legacy of faith and activism
- Young mentees practiced their leadership skills by leading Center tours themselves
- Mentees were able to host a variety of visitors from up and down and East Coast
- A Commemoration Day event was held, in which poems, songs, and prayers were offered
- Mentees participated in a sewing project, providing items for UVA's neonatal unit

## Iron Dresses

Iron Dresses is a church-based women's development program that provides leadership coaching, executive mentorship, and conferences aimed at women's empowerment. This 3C partner focuses on women who are university-age and older, serving the Harrisonburg community through its reach among emerging Black professionals. Working through the avenues of seminars, educational events, and transformative one-on-one and small group encounters, Iron Dresses is instrumental in shaping strong cadres of confident and gifted Black female community leaders.

During 2021, Iron Dresses was able to host the following 3 leadership programs, highlighting the emergence of female initiative and leadership across the age span.

1. *Dream Girls Camp* targets young ladies ages 8-17, connecting them with successful older women role models. This year the camp hosted 28 young girls and was held in June. A focus on life skills and personal values helped participants to lean into their leadership capacities.
2. The *Glam Squad* program went online in 2021 through 3 virtual sessions. Career coaching and professional networking give this initiative its relevance and attraction for women of color looking to enhance their personal and professional networks and business acumen.
3. In November Iron Dresses held its *Amplify Your Voice* conference, hosting local, regional, and national speakers and attendees. The theme for this year's conference focused on increasing confidence and competence through its tagline *Speak Up!*

In addition to the above activities, during 2021 3C began work on a collaborative podcast which features the stories of affiliated BIPOC women-of-faith from across the U.S. This unique podcast was initiated as a way for mentees to get a sense of the larger network they are a part of, gleaned wisdom and motivation from this network's breadth and reach. Collaborators on the podcast include: Celmali Jaime, Kiesha Tillman, Khari Jackson, Vahisha Hasan, Melody Pannell, and Kaziah Tillman.

Through the generosity of the JustPax fund, participants of this project gained an experiential understanding of what it takes to lead, guide, serve and protect as a leader. In the words of one program leader, this grant ***"helped shape not only [each participant's] future by enabling these young ladies to practice the skills they learned, but it also shaped them as individuals in an ever-changing world. We are eternally grateful for this opportunity."*** Our heartfelt appreciation (and respect) to JustPax for its investment in projects that actively create this better future – thank you!