

Black Leadership and Shared Humanity:

A Profile of Generative Reciprocity for Racial Equity

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Abstract

We offer an in-depth look at how a Black-led nonprofit, Life Pieces To Masterpieces (Washington, DC), stepped up to the challenges of 2020 – the devastation of the pandemic and of yet another wave of anti-Black violence. We place this story alongside scholarship about democratic education and the value of generative reciprocal relationships. While much of the scholarship focuses on university-community partnerships, we extend the analysis to look at the broader networks of relationships that nonprofits like LPTM cultivate. We argue that in the journey to equity and shared humanity, concepts like generative and transformative relationships need to account for the tremendous weight of systemic racism; this can be accomplished by explicitly centering the experiences and epistemology of Black communities. We show how these concepts

were deployed and extended in LPTM's activities from March – July 2020.

Introduction

From its start twenty-five years ago, Life Pieces To Masterpieces (LPTM) has been fighting what co-founder and Executive Director Mary Brown calls “the toxic mentality that surrounds Black and Brown poverty and how that is ingested by the oppressed.”¹ Located in Washington, D.C., LPTM uses artistic expression “to develop character and leadership, unlock innate potential, and prepare African American boys and young men to transform their lives and communities” (Life Pieces n.d.-b). Through songs, painting, speeches, performances, and other forms of expression, LPTM boys and men find purpose and a sense of their own power to create change.

In 2020, as the Black boys and young men were living through what Sister Mary² calls “an inferno of inequities,” the mission of LPTM spoke directly to the political and social issues of the time. The way Board member Brother Shawn Hardnett explained it in July, the community is at the nexus of two pandemics: COVID-19 “that is taking Black and Brown men off this planet at a higher rate than it is impacting any other demographic,” and anti-Black racism,

¹ *The project was collaboratively developed through hours of video and telephone calls. Quotations attributed to Sister Mary are transcribed from these conversations or from the weekly Executive Director reports she wrote from March - June.*

² *At Life Pieces, we refer to each other with familial titles; so, for example. Mary Brown is Sister Mary, and the boys and young men are given the title Brother. We carry that practice into this article.*

“which is doing what it was designed to do” (Life Pieces 2020a 0:00, 1:08). Yet, he insisted:

Life Pieces To Masterpieces was built as a response to George Floyd long before George Floyd happened. This organization started as a response to George Floyd before we knew his name. And now George Floyd has highlighted the fact that these inequities have always existed. . . It is critically important that at this time, LPTM stand for what we have always stood for (Life Pieces 2020a 0:41-0:55).

Many DC-area nonprofits closed their doors, furloughed staff, or stopped offering their programs in 2020, and “long standing African American/Black led nonprofits were significantly more likely to have to furlough staff than their white led counterparts” (Center for Nonprofit Advancement 2020). Yet LPTM never paused. When DC Public Schools shut their doors on March 14 and LPTM no longer had access to our classroom spaces, we moved immediately to supply families with food, masks, and cleaning supplies along with the devices and Wi-Fi needed for virtual learning. By early summer, we began offering socially-distant in-person activities at a local park. By October 2020, we offered daytime support for students who were trying to keep up with online school, and afternoon virtual and socially-distant in-person programs in art and our signature values-based “human development system.” LPTM did not furlough any staff.

LPTM stepped up to this moment by building on a foundation of deep relationships with the boys and young men, their families, staff, volunteers, donors, and other area nonprofits. LPTM stepped up to the moment by reinforcing the message we’ve conveyed all along: simultaneously insisting on Black leadership while offering explicit opportunities for others to join in building shared humanity. As Brother Shawn said, it’s a philosophy that goes back to LPTM’s

roots, and it has been fortified and refined in the inferno of recent events.

In the language of community-engaged scholarship and democratic education, LPTM is grounded in networks of generative reciprocal relationships. And in this new time of racial reckoning, LPTM offers a new and necessary model of reciprocity, one that centers the experiences of Black men and boys. In this article, we first review community-engaged scholarship about the idea of generative reciprocity and transformational partnerships. We then show how these concepts were deployed and extended in LPTM's activities from March – July 2020. The events are examined in three main phases:

- March –April 2020, in which LPTM cultivated relationships in response to COVID;
- May –July 2020, in which LPTM came together in response to the murders of Black men and women; and
- June –July 2020, when LPTM created the show *We See You*, as a public invitation to others to witness Black leadership.

Ultimately, we argue that the ideals of generative and transformative relationships need to account for the tremendous weight of systemic racism by explicitly centering the experiences and epistemology of Black communities.

Generative Reciprocity and Transformational Partnerships

To demonstrate how LPTM extends the idea of reciprocity within the context of anti-Black racism, we first offer some definitions of

the concept. As Lina Dostilio et al. (2012) argue in “Reciprocity, Saying What We Mean and Meaning What We Say,” reciprocity is one of those terms that everyone seems to agree is positive and worth pursuing, even if we don’t have a concrete sense for what it means. By studying how the term has been deployed across service-learning and community-engaged scholarship as well as in additional relevant fields, Dostilio et al. offer three “distinct but related orientations” to reciprocity:

Exchange. Participants give and receive something from the others that they would not otherwise have. In this orientation, reciprocity is the interchange of benefits, resources, or actions.

Influence. The processes and/or outcomes of the collaboration are iteratively changed as a result of being influenced by the participants and their contributed ways of knowing and doing. In this orientation, reciprocity is expressed as a relational connection that is informed by personal, social, and environmental contexts.

Generativity. As a function of the collaborative relationship, participants (who have or develop identities as co-creators) become and/or produce something new together that would not otherwise exist. This orientation may involve transformation of individual ways of knowing and being or of the systems of which the relationship is a part. The collaboration may extend beyond the initial focus as outcomes, as ways of knowing, and as systems of belonging evolve. (19-20)

Dostilio et al. (2012) explain that these positions have been expressed by community organizations as well as university faculty,

students, and community residents (20). Yet for the most part, and not surprisingly, the quotes they offer in their examination of *The Michigan Journal of Service Learning* and *Advances in Service-Learning Research* give the perspective from the university side. When scholars writing to scholars warn each other not set up transactional and hierarchical relationships, and to ensure, for example, that community partners “hav[e] choice in the level of involvement in the project and [are] fully engaged in the creation and critique of the knowledge created” (Puma et al. qtd in Dostilio et al. 20), the agency remains with the university-entity. In this article, we provide a more extensive analysis from the perspective of a Black-led nonprofit that works with Black communities. Our focus is not on university-nonprofit relationships but rather on relationships between a community organization and community members, other nonprofits, donors, and a broader public.

In the context of the growing public action to demand an end to anti-Black racism, questions of equity in reciprocity are especially important. Dostilio et al. (2012) consider how equity might manifest in each type of reciprocal partnership. *Exchange-based reciprocity*, they note, can operate at an individual or collective level (23). *Influence-oriented reciprocity* builds to new products or outcomes through a collaborative iterative process, and the equity depends on how well that process accounts for not only the power differential among parties but also the potentially different, potentially identity-based epistemological frameworks (24). Finally, *generative reciprocity* draws on a more ecological framework of interdependence and shifts a focus from what partners do together towards how they are together (25). This idea of “making space,” which emerged from talks between Canada and First Nations,

“requires [those with privilege] to think outside of frameworks that structure their own thoughts and experiences and yet regarding which, prior to the encounter [with marginalized individuals and groups], they are not even aware” (Steinman, 2011, p. 11). This new way of being can contribute to authentic relationship-building that honors people’s multiple forms of meaning-making, traditions, and cultures instead of rendering them invisible, manipulating them to fit within dominant paradigms, or merely acknowledging them. The potential of reciprocity within these new spaces is generativity-oriented in that it opens the possibility for new and different ways of being, processes, and outcomes to emerge. (25)

This kind of generative reciprocity requires that partners take personal and interpersonal risks to understand difference. And the question of power and positionality is critical to consider. When the analysis about reciprocity takes place within a context where dominant people and ideologies threaten to impose their views onto the partnerships, the rhetoric emphasizes letting go, making room, listening, and being open to new perspectives. Yet in the context of years of racial reckoning, it’s important to acknowledge that in cross-racial interactions, the call for both sides to change can be problematic. Non-Black partners in the co-creative space must not only acknowledge the experience and worldview of Black leaders and voices, they must acknowledge their own deficits in this arena. Dostilio et al. (2012) draw on feminist and Indigenous perspectives to clarify:

Jones and Jenkins (2008) assert the importance of acknowledging and contending with the “indigene-colonizer hyphen”: whereas “colonizer peoples assert the *us* [emphasis added] in a shared modern life, Indigenous peoples – as a matter of political, practical, and identity survival as Indigenous peoples – insist on a profound difference at the Self-Other border. The hyphen is

nonnegotiable” (p. 475). To postulate mutual transformation with authenticity (Haig-Brown & Archibald, 1996), it is imperative to avoid thinking of transformation in terms of sameness and to approach co-creation of knowledge with awareness of the distinct epistemologies that influence individuals’ and groups’ values regarding and approaches to knowledge creation. (27)

The focus for non-Black partners in particular has to be on learning new ways of being, of determining how to build shared humanity in a manner that celebrates and centers Blackness. Non-Black partners must listen to how Black Leaders invite them into the relationship of “us.”

Indeed, the pressure of the times has created conditions ripe for this new kind of generative reciprocity, and Black-led organizations have the opportunity to guide public conversations and to model a way forward for nonprofits. According to an October 2020 study of over 255 organizations in the Washington, DC area commissioned by Center for Nonprofit Advancement, nonprofits had “courageous and inclusive conversations sparked by the recent murders of people of color including George Floyd;” on a scale of 1-5, the organizations on average ranked the extent of these conversations within their organizations at 3.8 (slide 19). However, they also said that they feel unequipped (1.3 on a scale of 1-5) to work with the diverse populations served by their organizations (slide 19). 59% of the organizations are “planning on doing more significant work to fill race and equity gaps in the communities they serve in the next year” (slide 21). We argue that LPTM’s actions – especially during the tumultuous first months of 2020 – to build and sustain generative reciprocal relationships with Black youth and mentors, community members, partner nonprofits, and donors, offers an instructive model for this work.

Life Pieces To Masterpieces, an Overview

Before we dive into the events from May – July 2020, we provide a brief overview of LPTM’s operations and philosophy.

Founded by Mary Brown, Larry Quick, and Ben Johnson in 1996, Life Pieces To Masterpieces began as a way to engage young Black men in Ward 7 where Quick grew up. A professionally trained artist, Quick had relied on painting to help him navigate a challenging childhood and he offered this tool to the first cohort of 7 “apprentices.” To this day, young boys and men in the program are called “apprentices” and are greeted as Brothers. The organization continues to use the same signature sewn-canvas painting style. The apprentices collaborate to envision, paint, cut, and sew paintings in response to experiences in their lives. The metaphor speaks to their own capacity to shape their world: by seeing and reflecting on the pieces of their lives, they can stitch themselves into masterpieces. They are the painters and protagonists of their lives.

LPTM is a medium sized nonprofit; in 2020, we employed nine full-time staff, twenty part-time staff (including co-educators, learning support tutors, and operational and program consultants), and managed a budget that hovered between \$800,000 - \$1 million. When not excluded by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, we are housed on the top floor of a DC public school. The apprentices come to the program from the local school and some area charter schools. Over seventy boys and young men, aged 3 – 25, participate in LPTM’s after school program. The program is well-known and respected in the area; there is always a waiting list.



Figure 1. LPTM's Shield of Faith.

In the afterschool program, the apprentices engage in activities designed around a curriculum called the “human development system” (Life Pieces, n.d.-a). A key component is the “shield of faith,” a button that all apprentices, staff, and leaders pin over our hearts, in which a color wheel is overlaid with key concepts like discipline (brown), giving (blue), language (yellow), loving (orange), and leadership (black). The Shield of Faith serves as a decision-making tool; apprentices are asked to consider which concept is most useful for understanding the challenge and opportunity in a particular moment. Age-appropriate activities are designed to develop the younger apprentices’ understanding of the concepts and their ability to use the shield to make good choices in their daily

lives. High school-aged apprentices meet with mentors in Saturday Academy where they set goals for college. The older apprentices receive a stipend so that they themselves can mentor the younger apprentices in the Monday through Friday afterschool program.

One of LPTM's premises is that "your thoughts, your words, your actions determine your destiny" (Life Pieces, n.d. -a). In the context of violent and systemic anti-Black racism, the premise can appear idealistic and individualistic, putting all the pressure for social change onto individual choices instead of broader systems power and policy. But LPTM acknowledges the toxicity of anti-Black racism around us, including limited expressions of Black masculinity and the nihilism that comes from seeing the gap between the rhetoric of meritocracy and the actual conditions of hard-working dedicated people (see also Ryder 2011). We position Black boys and young men as the protagonists in the fight for equity. Our change narrative is:

At Life Pieces To Masterpieces, we are changing the ways Black boys and young men see themselves, we are changing the way the world sees Black boys and young men, and our Black Boys and young men are helping our world discover Shared Humanity. (Life Pieces 2020c).

To change the way Black boys and young men see themselves, LPTM provides an historical grounding in African cultures and Black liberation. To change the way the world sees Black boys and young men, the apprentices have opportunities to engage publicly: LPTM apprentices have given testimony at DC city council meetings, been guests with the local NPR host Kojo Nnamdi, and delivered speeches at the Kennedy Center as finalists in national civic forums like the MIKVA. During Black History Month in 2022, Brother Cateo was invited to the White House and [introduced President Biden](#).

Life Pieces boys and young men perform regularly in ceremonies and celebrations hosted by Life Pieces.

From the start, LPTM has sought transformative relationships with people inside and outside the organization. The “Who We Are” page of the website explains,

Who we are lies in . . . our expectation that all who touch our mission – apprentices, teachers, mentors, staff, volunteers, and community partners – will commit to their own journey of personal growth and character development. This has led to a powerful organizational culture and an exceptional team that embraces vulnerability, shared humanity, and commitment to social justice. (Life Pieces n.d.-c)

A review of LPTM activities in spring and summer 2020 illustrates how we mobilized through these transformational relationships.

March – April: Reciprocity in the Time of COVID

In the early weeks after DC closed public schools and encouraged people to stay-in-place, LPTM pivoted to address immediate needs. Some staff were designated the Frontline Team. They received training to become certified within CDC guidelines to make safe deliveries. Drawing on both board networks and relationships with area nonprofits, LPTM began to deliver food weekly to over fifteen LPTM families. In the meantime, rates of people testing positive for COVID-19 grew, with Ward 7 being consistently among the highest in the city. By April, LPTM families had felt the blow. Seven people from the LPTM circle had died. The staff, the leaders, and the apprentices felt the losses and a rising anger and frustration that Black and Brown people were dying in disproportionate numbers.

Timeline 1 : 2020

Feb 23. Ahmaud Arbery killed by white men while jogging (Glynn County, South Georgia)

Mar 13. Breonna Taylor killed when police shoot into her home (Louisville Kentucky)

Mar 14. DC Public Schools close; COVID-19 stay in place orders begin. Many LPTM families lose their jobs.

March 14. LPTM Frontline team begins to get certified in safe delivery protocols; deliver food, hygiene supplies & devices to connect online; staff and older apprentices begin sewing masks.

March 30 Amanda Marshall founds Families4Families & begins delivering food for 15 LPTM families weekly.

Mid April. COVID rates of infection in Ward 7 are among the highest in the city. Spouse of a staff member tests positive.

April 25. Seven people from LPTM families have died.

Late April: LPTM starts working w DC Central Kitchen to deliver food from DCPS locations to LPTM families.

April 29: NBC4 Story about LPTM; Brother Damir featured with rap about COVID-19.

Figure 2. Timeline February-April 2020.

Connections

As always, LPTM operated with a focus on generative, reciprocal relationships. Sister Mary recalled a phone call that crystallized her sense of purpose:

This coalesced for me because of that mom who calls you at 2 o'clock in the morning in tears: 'I lost my job that I've had for 5 years, I caught the bus to the store, I'm looking at my phone, they're saying shelter-in-place, and I'm trying to get food. You go to the check cash; that's a line. Go to the store, and there's nothing there. Go to the CVS next door. Metro. Corner store. Nothing. And the first people you call is LPTM. There's the fear, the challenges, nothing in the store. And the first person you call is LPTM. COVID-19 is helping us be who we are.' We want to be unapologetically who we are.

The years of trust and consistency of the LPTM model made it possible for LPTM to remain deeply connected with the families right away. Within LPTM, the staff moved with a clear sense of urgency. Teachers checked in with the boys and set up virtual classes twice a week; the classes had high attendance levels. Program staff called parents weekly and passed along information about the household situation to the teachers. They learned about ever-evolving needs. For example, LPTM families who had COVID-19 symptoms were often sent home from the ER without being tested and without the medical equipment to monitor their symptoms. The need for medical supplies was passed to the Frontline Team. People in the community soon took note that LPTM was one of the only organizations still working and mobilizing in Ward 7. Councilmember Vincent Gray attended a LPTM board call in early May to thank us for the work we were doing.

The connections came from outside Ward 7 as well. Amanda Marshall reached out to Sister Mary with an offer to mobilize families from her (whiter and wealthier) area of town to collect and deliver food. Drawing from conversations with LPTM families, Sister Mary and the Frontline Team shared a basic shopping list. Soon, Sister Amanda had launched a nonprofit, Families4Families, that brought food and hygiene supplies for fifteen families each week. The LPTM Frontline Team met them and coordinated the final stage of the delivery. From this beginning, Families4Families expanded their model to twelve cities around the country, providing over 700,000 meals as of April 2022 (Families4Families, n.d.).

Growth

At every stage of the process, Sister Mary and LPTM were attentive to the need to grow and adapt. The relationships among the staff and apprentices allowed them to learn from each other. As the Brothers in Power (the high school and college-aged apprentices) discussed the racial disparities among COVID-19 deaths, Sister Mary found herself in deep conversations with the program staff about the racist components within social determinants of health. The Brothers on the staff pushed her to use new language to define the toxic anti-Black mentality that LPTM confronts. For example, she said, "I would never have used the term 'food apartheid.' I would say 'digital divide,' and they would say 'racial digital divide.'"

Expression

In the spirit of our ongoing philosophy to center Black agency, LPTM maintained a focus on creating and contributing. Some staff and older apprentices began making and delivering masks to LPTM families, elderly residents, area hospitals, and even to some local businesses. The younger apprentices continued with their artwork, using supplies delivered by the Frontline Team and following art videos created by their mentors and teachers. Middle school apprentices wrote and recorded songs.

At the end of April, local news station NBC4 ran a story about LPTM's support of local families. After a quick review of LPTM's origins, the interview cut to [a video of Brother Damir](#), one of the middle school apprentices, singing:

Ummmm, Lord I don't understand it! A pandemic! And I can't change it. I'm only one kid and can't stand it. My heart can't take this damage! Ummmm, This virus is so tragic! World, you're making it hard for me! (Finch 2020 0:53 – 1:07)

Reporter Justin Finch described the rap as “piercing lyrics capturing the pain of young eyes, watching their world unravel” (Finch 2020). The camera moved to Maurice Kie, Brother Moe, a Program Director at LPTM and the head of the Frontline Team, who contextualized the song: “We’re true believers that art saves lives” (1:19). In the background, the Frontline Team gathered groceries and supplies for distribution. Sister Mary then clarified the inequity in healthcare. She explained that people who had been in contact with COVID positive relatives were sent home from the ER without being tested and without equipment to monitor symptoms. Finch closed the interview by reiterating the difficult conditions in Ward 7 and inviting people to contribute resources to LPTM.

The NBC4 coverage was welcome. It caught the attention of local leaders, who asked Sister Mary and the Frontline team to spread the word about how to access COVID testing. But the overall frame of the NBC4 story was on “need,” on anguish and pain. LPTM was positioned as an organization addressing that need which, while accurate, left out the bigger messages of relationship and agency.

LPTM responded by working with a local video producer and former LPTM Development Manager, Mignotae Kebede, to tell our own story. The 6-minute video “[Connecting More Deeply. . . At a Distance](#)” focused less on need and more on systemic inequalities and the active, interconnected role LPTM has taken in response. The video drew on a framework that governs all LPTM work –the 4Cs of Connect, Create, Contribute, and Celebrate (LPTM n.d.-a). Sister Mary emphasized how the team was “connecting with children and families, so that they know they are loved, they are not forgotten, and that in the midst of this frightening time, they know that Life Pieces is with them for the long haul” (LPTM 2020b, 1:00-1:20) As footage captured the Frontline Team gathering and delivering groceries, she named the inequity: “When we see the

injustice of food apartheid, we're there" (1:23). Brother Tyriek Mack, Saturday Academy coordinator, described the racial digital divide & how LPTM delivered laptops (2:24-2:33). LPTM teachers Brother DaQuan Glosson and Brother Ben Lasso described the connections happening in the Zoom classes, "letting [the boys] know that the Brotherhood is still there" (2:49-2:55).

Focusing on the second and third C's – Create and Contribute – highlighted our capacity and agency. Brother Donnell Kie, a program alum and Frontline Team member, explained how he tested patterns and created an assembly process among the staff and older apprentices to sew masks for area hospitals and people in the community (3:56-4:18). Sister Mary pointed to the relationships, "The Shield of Faith is alive with all our partners, all of us with our arms outstretched around our families, doing our best to protect them from a virus of inequities that's been in our community as long as we can remember" (4:30-4:47). And Brother Ben brought it back to agency: "right now, it's easy to feel powerless because we don't have a lot of control over things that are happening, but [remember] that your power is your thoughts, your words, your actions, because that determines your destiny" (4:55-5:11).

The message of this video – shared through the newsletter and, as we explain below, on a call with donors—captures LPTM's response to COVID-19. Deep transformational relationships with families, staff, and other nonprofits created the opportunity for LPTM to both create and serve as a conduit for community resources. As the summer continued, the partnerships would develop further.

May – June: Naming Anti-Black Toxicity

Confronted by the terror of Ahmaud Arbery's murder, the recklessness of shots that killed Breonna Taylor, and the excruciating indifference to George Floyd's cries to be allowed simply to breathe, the leadership, staff, and apprentices at LPTM were shaken. Watching the murders and witnessing just how easily a White woman revived time-worn tropes to threaten a Black man birdwatching in Central Park reactivated personal traumas as well. How could living in America still be so precarious for Black Americans fifty years after Malcolm X and Dr. King?

LPTM asserts LOVE + SECURITY + EXPRESSION = LIFE (Life Pieces n.d.-a), yet at the end of May, without jobs, healthcare, or any sign that Black people were safe in the streets, the LPTM community could not feel secure. By the end of the month, thirteen people connected to LPTM families had died. Sister Mary said, "It's a pressure cooker now. COVID combined with attacks on black men. Mothers are expressing new levels of concern for their sons."

LPTM's foundational belief in shared humanity and the power to change how the world sees Black and Brown boys started to feel naïve. In May and June 2020, when the pressure could have pulled the organization apart, Sister Mary and her team made it clear: there is a path forward; the whole world is not against you.

Connections

In sessions facilitated by Black men and long-time mentors – Board member Shawn Hardnett (CEO and Founder of Statesmen College Preparatory Academy), Keith Crawford (Pharmacologist, NIH), William Pitts AKA Elder Bill (LPTM Family Engagement Advisor),

among others – the high school and college-aged Brothers in Power and many of the LPTM staff came together to hold each other, to hear each other, to debate, to imagine the right next steps for Black liberation. While protesters marched in cities around the nation, and while the DC Mayor declared the street in front of the White House “Black Lives Matter Plaza,” the atmosphere within the Saturday Academy class was charged. Sister Mary explained,

Everything is descending. You can feel the weight of all that on the gentlemen. . . They are writing: what are you feeling; what picture do you want to tell the story? We had to adjust the curriculum to talk. We had boys at all ends of the spectrum. Why are the oppressed always the peacemakers? How is it working for us? It was heavy.

The group had the space for these challenging, vulnerable conversations because they had been meeting in Saturday Academy throughout the year, exploring their values and identities; indeed, many of the youth, volunteers, and mentors had been part of the group for years. The transformative relationships provided space to work together and move forward.

Timeline 2 : 2020

May 1. White militiamen enter the Michigan Statehouse.

May 2. 11 people connected to LPTM families have died.

May 4. DC's Ward 7 Councilmember Vincent Gray attends LPTM Board meeting to offer thanks and share plans for more COVID testing.

May 6-June 2 LPTM parents participate in Color Me Community, introducing them to the LPTM philosophy and preparing them to build a support network among parents.

May 9. The Brothers in Power (high school and college-aged apprentices) continue to process their responses to the murders of Arbery & Taylor, alongside the rising COVID deaths.

May 25. George Floyd is killed by police.(Minneapolis, MN); Christian Cooper is threatened while birdwatching in Central Park. Protesters take to the streets across America. In DC, they converge on Lafayette Square, near the White House.

May 28. Thirteen people connected to the LPTM family have died; several more are hospitalized

June 1. Donor & Partners call; 35 people attend.

Figure 3. Timeline May-June 2020.

The Brothers in Power relied on the processes LPTM has used from the beginning, which Sister Mary described like this:

Work at LPTM is a journey. Turn your feelings into creating. Get it out. What are you feeling? Then guide. How does it connect to the Human Development System? Love and time and drill down to the level of shared humanity.

The profound challenge LPTM confronted was: how can we to return to a vision of shared humanity when we are swimming in white supremacy culture?

Growth

For Sister Mary, the answer was to call attention to people close by, especially the cross-racial people already holding, witnessing, and

co-creating the necessary space for Black expression about Black pain. In the Saturday Academy Zoom meetings, for example, in addition to the many Black leaders and mentors, the Brothers in Power were joined by a white staff person, two white college students who had been volunteering with LPTM for years, and a Latinx mentor. Sister Mary observed,

There are white people. There are people from different races. They may not understand our pain the way we understand it. But they are for peace. They are for the power in voting. The power in healthy aligned organizing.

The presence of people outside the community who had come to be in the virtual space with the Brothers in Power is evidence of shared humanity. Their presence signified a role for non-Black allies even in the depth of this pain: We see you.

The LPTM gentlemen wanted to test this theory: they asked to be able to share their experiences with a larger audience.

Expression

Within a week after George Floyd's murder, Sister Mary and the LPTM development team decided to transform a previously scheduled "30-minute Gratitude & COVID-19 Update Discussion" with a group of donors into a Zoom event that would include the staff and Brothers in Power. An updated agenda to the guests – representatives from foundations, corporations and government agencies – explained,

Our original agenda was to focus on the impact of the pandemic on the LPTM programming and path forward. However, given the death of George Floyd and the impact it is having on our community, we must shift the agenda.

The gentlemen of Life Pieces have asked to come together on this call to begin a dialogue about how this program has allowed them to navigate pandemic uncertainties, police brutality, and all the layers of systemic racism and other isms with intentionality and intensity. Your presence on this call will send a signal to our boys and young men that we are with them, that we hear them, that we see them, that we hold them even when the country is burning.

Thirty-five people – including Amanda Marshall and her family – joined the June 1 call, which featured a moment of silence for the people in LPTM families who had passed, the “Connecting More Deeply. . . At a Distance” video explaining how LPTM had responded to COVID-19 (sharing this had been the original purpose for the call), and then an open discussion in which guests could ask LPTM apprentices questions.

Some of the LPTM gentlemen expressed how the program had supported their distance learning or provided food. Most stayed quiet, their faces visible in the small Zoom boxes. Sister Mary shared some of the pain and anguish that the LPTM family was experiencing in response to the systemic injustices that had become so visible. At the thirty-minute mark, Sister Mary noted that the scheduled time for the meeting was over and invited people to remain on the call if they wanted to continue the discussion. Everyone stayed.

Most of the people representing foundations, corporations, and government agencies were non-Black, and many later shared their gratitude for being invited into the intimacy and immediacy of that call. In the week after George Floyd’s murder, when the country was roiling in response to the collective outrage about anti-Black racism, the June 1 call offered the privilege of being in relationship, of being invited close to the pain, of having an opportunity to show

through this connection that the broader world had not abandoned Black men. The simple message spoke to the moment: You matter. We see you.

June 4: Dear Beautiful Black Boy & Dear World

A few days later, on June 4, LPTM released two letters, “Dear Beautiful Black Boy” and “Dear World,” which reenforced that LPTM’s central values – centering Black boys and calling up shared humanity – are always already the necessary responses for the time.

“Dear Beautiful Black Boy” began

We see you. At LPTM, we have never not seen you. We love you – a real love, a deep and profound love, an enduring love. We will be here for you – because we always have. You should expect that LPTM will act on our value of Shared Humanity. We believe that Love + Security + Expression = Life. So live, beautiful black boy. Live! Know you’re loved. Feel safe in your own expression. Fight to build communities where we all can feel safe, where we all know we’re loved, where we all have space to express ourselves. (Life Pieces 2020c)

The letter expressed sorrow to Black boys for their pain; assurance that LPTM supports any way they might be feeling or acting in response to the murders of Black people; and a commitment to provide space for them to cope.

“Dear World” spoke to “all those, of all races, religions, nationalities, sexual orientations, and gender identities, who join us

in the fight for our world as we discover together our Shared Humanity.” The letter reminded them that helping the world discover shared humanity “is an enduring effort, a generational effort, and it is our boys and young men who are leading us in this effort.” The letter insisted “We need systemic, institutional change, and that will take absolutely everyone in this fight” (Life Pieces 2020c).

The two letters were distributed to LPTM families, volunteers, donors, foundations, and others through LPTM’s newsletter; they were distributed to a broader public through social media. The two letters illustrated LPTM’s intimate connection with the young boys and men in the program and invited “the world” into a partnership to fight for institutional change. The letters extended the experience of the June 1 phone call – an assurance to the apprentices that they are seen, and an invitation to a broader community to celebrate and support Black leadership, a chance to see how Black leaders support Black boys, and an opportunity to hear from people in the middle of the inferno of systemic injustice about their experiences and their demands. These messages were reiterated through LPTM’s summer programming and, in a final live, video broadcast [We See You](#) that reached close to five hundred people.

June – July: We See You

[We See You](#), which streamed to a virtual audience of approximately 475 viewers, was a culmination of four intense months of virtual and socially-distant in-person programming. In addition to explaining LPTM’s underlying philosophy, the show included “Connecting More Deeply. . . At a Distance,” video footage from the summer’s “Connecting Communities Across the Globe” programming for

elementary and middle school students, and a montage from Brothers in Power in which they spoke about their individual and collective responses to racial injustice.

Timeline 3 : 2020

June 1. Black Lives Matter protesters in Lafayette Square are tear-gassed; President Trump has a photo op at St. John's church.

June 4. LPTM releases two letters: "Dear Beautiful Black Boy" & "Dear World."

June 5 Mayor Bowser renames a section of 16th street Black Lives Matter Plaza.

June 8 George Floyd's memorial in Houston; 4 LPTM paintings exhibited in Art4Justice

June 15. LPTM summer outdoor, socially-distant programming begins in Marvin Gaye park, in partnership with the nonprofit Washington Parks and People

July 29. *We See You* streamed to an audience of 475 viewers and kicked off a \$70K fundraising campaign.

Figure 4. Timeline June-July 2020.

We See You projected the three core tenants of LPTM's change narrative first published in "Dear World":

At Life Pieces To Masterpieces, we are changing the ways Black boys and young men see themselves, we are changing the way the world sees Black boys and young men, and our Black Boys and young men are helping our world discover Shared Humanity.

The interplay among these messages is complex. Black men and boys do not speak in a single voice about these times. Moreover, the impulse to invoke "shared humanity" could dilute the necessary focus on Black lives. However, because of LPTM's long history of working in this intersection, our approach offers insight about how to build coalitions of support that unequivocally support Black boys and men while clarifying the essential interdependence of a shared

humanity. Our work is grounded in the value of expression for understanding oneself, connecting with others, and creating action.

Connecting Communities Across the Globe

In an early part of the show, the younger boys enacted a news telecast, reporting what they had learned in LPTM's summer "Connecting Communities Across the Globe" about communities in Nigeria, Japan, and the Wampanoag tribe of Southern Maryland. They counted, sang, and introduced themselves in other languages; they danced and drummed. The playfulness and joy in the first part of the show was a vital message for the audience, reminding viewers to celebrate the boys' creativity and playfulness.

As much as the globally-focused summer programming invited the apprentices to understand the broader world, it also invited them to rethink their own identity by introducing them to other cultures that have had to fight to get their voices heard. Tree House (ages 3-6) studied Nigeria, Kings (ages 7-9) studied Japan, and Legacy (ages 10-13) studied tribes of Native Americans. They learned about the impacts of COVID-19 around the world and focused on stories of resilience in each of these cultures. The boys in the Legacy class, for example, shared the counternarratives they had learned about the Trail of Tears, including that about one thousand Cherokee "hid in the mountains and are known as the ancestors of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, a sovereign nation in North Carolina" (LPTM 2020d 6:00). They reported that the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe recently won a court victory in the fight for their land.

Brothers in Power

In the closing ten minutes of the show, six Brothers in Power claimed their roles as protagonists in their lives and talked back to the toxicity of dominant narratives about who they are. They began with LPTM's statement of purpose, "When youth are awakened to a sense of purpose, our power is limitless" (LPTM n.d-a; LPTM 2020a, 2:07) and then introduced themselves by each naming their characteristics, such as "I am outspoken. I am philosophical. And I am enduring;" "I am ambitious, genuine, and thoughtful" (2:27-2:51). This was followed by brief emphatic counterstatements, such as: "I am not a brute. I am not belligerent. I am not a criminal. I am not helpless" (2:51-3:04). Together, the six Brothers said, "We are Brothers in Power. We are resilient Black men" (3:04).

The Brothers in Power shared their experiences of Spring 2020: "we watched our brothers fight for their lives against COVID-19; we also watched as our brothers fought for their lives in the war, the war on the streets" (6:07-6:15). They spoke the names: Breonna Taylor. Ahmaud Arbery. George Floyd. They named the problem: "These lives are casualties of systemic racism" (6:25). They admitted: "Our emotions swelled, knowing that they could have been us, our families, our friends. Saturday Academy created a platform for us to express ourselves, to learn about different forms of resistance, and to identify how we can support Black liberation" (6:26-6:39). Yet the Brothers in Power did not elide their differences; they refused to speak for everyone in LPTM or for all Black people: "We are here. We have always been here. We are not all the same. Some of us believe in police reform, others in defunding, others in the abolition of police altogether. There's not one way to be black" (6:39-6:54). At the same time, they located their Blackness within the broader context of America: "Despite our differences, our Blackness makes us all a target" (6:55).

They closed by charging the viewers to step up; they took turns conveying their final message:

We want action.

Action is educating yourself. Action is choosing where to spend your dollars. Action is speaking up against injustices. Action is moving out of your comfort zone. Action is knowing when you're wrong. Action is treating everyone like people. Action is not respectability politics. Action is demanding accountability without cancel culture. Action is speaking out against those who don't agree. Action is respecting others' ideas.

Actions take many shapes and forms, but ultimately, actions take sacrifice.

[All together] What are you willing to lose?

We see you. You see us. Our blackness is not an excuse to dehumanize us. (6:55-7:46)

We See You celebrated Black beauty, joy, and creativity. At the very end of the show, staff member Andrew Bickle explained that “our presentation was created by Black youth, led by primarily Black mentors, filmed by a Black man, produced by a Black woman, live audio was produced by a Black woman, and live feed behind-the-scene came from a Black man. We have all been supported by an incredibly diverse, majority Black Board” (10:08- 10:09). The show came together as a place for Black boys and young men to disrupt anti-Black racism and declare their own agency, individuality, and humanity.

At the same time, *We See You* addressed a diverse audience of donors, volunteers, community members, and curious onlookers from around the globe, many of whom were newly aware of the organization and perhaps newly aware of the extent of racial inequities in the nation's public health and justice systems. For that audience, *We See You* clarified their role as part of shared humanity.

The Brothers invited an audience of current and new supporters to continue to see Black boys and men, and to carry the message forward.

In the end, though, the Brothers insisted on the power that comes from being seen. “We See You” is not only what the audience is invited to do – to serve as a witness and an amplifier for the knowledge and leadership of the Black boys and men. “We See You” is also what the Brothers in Power said to the viewers: *We are watching. We notice when you stop seeing us for who we are. We hold you accountable.* And this dynamic – a diverse audience listening to and being held accountable to Black leadership – is the kind of generative reciprocity that the times call for. LPTM offers a way of understanding Black perspectives and a way of being that centers Black agency.

I Keep Thinking: We’re a Best Practice

Back in March 2020, Sister Mary recalled a conversation with an early cohort of LPTM apprentices about what success in LPTM might look like. The younger boys said, “If we keep coming.” The older boys said, “If we’re still alive.” In 2020, the metric of still being alive resonated with new intensity as more people connected to the LPTM families died from COVID-19. Two years later, while we are winning the fight against this pandemic, we are now taking on rampant gun violence in our community. The park which was our outdoor “paradise” during the height of COVID-19 is now a land mine; the playground of Drew ES playground is a “killing field” where nearby gunshots and manhunts send the young boys rushing off the playground to hide inside the building. Of course, in our fashion, we will press on, as we always do, through generative partnerships.

Over time, and working with other academics and consultants, LPTM has tried to fit our approach within the trending theories of the time. At the urging of funders and assessment consultants, we moved away from these original metrics of success – staying alive, showing up. Yet the new assessment tools were too costly to keep up, and the frameworks seemed more focused on economic outcomes than relationships. “I doubt myself,” Sister Mary said, “but at the end of the day, I’m realizing that we’ve been right all along. It would have been great to have experts who understood our concept, but now I know how important it is to connect with people who connect to and respect our people. But not to remain isolated.”

LPTM’s approach to generative transformative relationships within the organization and with LPTM families has allowed the program leadership and staff to continue to understand more fully the toxicity of anti-Black racism and all the other isms that keep Black boys from believing the premise: “your thoughts, your words, and your actions determine your destiny” (LPTM n.d-a).

LPTM’s approach to generative transformational relationships with nonprofits, donors, volunteers, and other institutions outside the organization has allowed LPTM to bring more and more people to the mission to recognize what LPTM has to offer is a deeply grounded expertise. By learning about and working with LPTM’s model, more people can recognize and extend what Sister Mary calls “the expertise coming out of Ward 7, . . . to honor the culture, to embrace who we are.”

As an organization that operates at the nexus of the twin pandemics the times – COVID-19 and anti-Black racism – LPTM serves as a best practice of generative relationships that account for the

tremendous weight of systemic racism by explicitly centering the experiences and epistemology of Black communities.

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About the Authors

Mary Brown As one of Life Pieces To Masterpieces' Co-Founders in 1996, Mary Brown has worked for decades to create meaningful change in the lives of young people and their families locally and nationally. Sister Mary is currently LPTM's Executive Director, working with the team to advance the critical mission of using artistic expression to develop character and leadership, unlock potential, and prepare Black boys and young men to transform their lives and communities.

Mary was a member of the national faculty at Neighborworks America for seventeen years, responsible for the design, facilitation, and evaluation of training programs nationwide for youth development workers, community developers and organizers.

Phyllis Mentzell Ryder An associate professor at The George Washington University, Phyllis Ryder has been connected to Life Pieces To Masterpieces for over fifteen years through her community-engaged first-year writing course. She currently serves as Secretary to the Board of LPTM. Her research focuses on the rhetoric of social change with a focus on nonprofits; she also writes about community-engaged and antiracist pedagogy. Her book *Rhetorics for Community Action* features a close look at LPTM's model of social change.

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