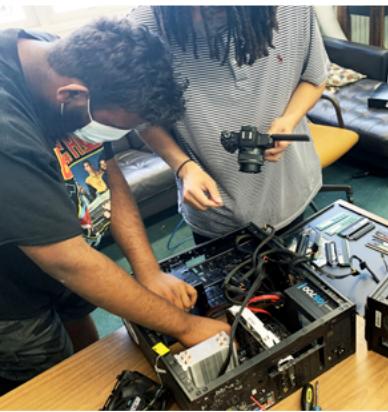




# COMMUNITY FORGE IMPACT REPORT 2020-2021





# OUR MISSION:

Building an equitable economy for Wilkinsburg and the Greater Pittsburgh region by creating opportunities that promote **professional development, financial wellbeing, and entrepreneurial growth.**

**Community Forge aspires to break down silos in Pittsburgh by creating connections between members of disinvested communities and those with resources and knowledge to share.**

Community Forge was formed in January 2017 by 8 young people with a goal of revitalizing the recently-closed Johnston Elementary School in Wilkinsburg, giving it new life as an asset run by and for the people it serves. Community Forge opened its doors in 2018 and has since established itself as a home for artists, educators, students, entrepreneurs, and innovators from Wilkinsburg and surrounding neighborhoods.

To assist our growth as a local hub of economic and educational opportunity, Community Forge LLC. has become part of its parent nonprofit, Locally Grown. With their support, we have launched a broad array of community-specific programs that focus on talent acceleration, entrepreneurship, and small business sustainability. We aim to facilitate the development of a designed diverse network of creators and leaders.

Building a trusted, responsive relationship with members of our community is essential to our work. Together with our community partners and collaborators, we're bridging the opportunity access gap in Pittsburgh and forging connections for a more equitable future.

# FORGING AHEAD

## A Message from the Executive Director

**To all those who have been involved in Community Forge these past years,**

I want to start by giving all of my gratitude to every business owner, young person, community member, volunteer, and supporter who has worked alongside Community Forge for helping us make a truly unique and beautiful space for positive transformation.

In 2017, we built Community Forge on a pipe dream: the belief that local people with good hearts and minds could lead a fresh way of doing community development from the ground up. Growing up in the Mon Valley, surrounded by blight, I spent years wondering what kept my community from creating more space to convene. While we exist in a complex and unjust economic system, with each passing day, I gain confidence and hope in the idea that communities have the power to come together to create these collaborative spaces for growth, forging pathways into a better future.

Coming on five years since starting Community Forge, we've seen amazing things occur: There are now friendships across different communities and diverse people that may never have existed without the Forge. We've witnessed small businesses owned by a

Wilkinsburger growing from a team of one to having over a dozen staff. There are youth that treat our facility as a second home, knowing they can feel safe and trust in those who are around. We have witnessed the right resources getting to the right people at the right time, leading to change and growth on a personal level. The culmination of this humbles me and continues to propel our team to think bigger and do more.

This report sheds light on some of the stories that happened between 2020 and 2021, then gives a peek at our ideas in development. Community Forge believes in working toward a connected, multi-cultural, and just society where people and the environment are given dignity, love, and a fair shot at a healthy and happy life. Years like 2020 can bring out a lot of cynicism and strife, making it hard to believe any positive change narrative. All I can close in on is that Community Forge sees a lot of hope. We'll continue to be there for people who have received less investment from our society, construct inroads toward a more equitable society, and, together, create the world we want to live in. It **is** possible—we have witnessed it through many incredible Community Forge moments.

To all of you who have helped us over the years, we look forward to continuing our work together. And to those who we'll meet soon, our doors are open. You're all family to us, and once society has a better handle on COVID we can't wait to gather with you again!

With all our love and gratitude,  
**Mike Skirpan, Executive Director  
and the CF Team**



# TIMELINE: 2019-2021

**MARCH 2019:** Locally Grown, the nonprofit parent organization of Community Forge LLC, founded

**JUNE 2019:** Community Forge launches pilot program of what will become the **Bloom business incubator** with eight local entrepreneurs

**MARCH 2020:** In response to the pandemic, we begin fundraising for our **COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund**

**APRIL-MAY 2020:** Collaborating with Feed the Hood, we begin **distribution of free meals** and **emergency resources** to neighborhood families

**JUNE 2020:** Locally Grown acquires Community Forge LLC, expanding our programming and staff

**SEPTEMBER 2020:** Bloom business incubator officially opens with a roster of **30 local businesses**

**JANUARY 2021:** Community Forge joins E3 Alliance, a coalition that supports Pittsburgh-area minority entrepreneurs, as a founding board member

**MARCH 2021:** **Entrepreneur Hub concept developed;** Hub renovations at Community Forge begin

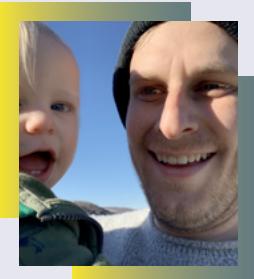
**SEPTEMBER 2021:** Launch of new financial literacy class, **Money Moves**, and ForgeFest returns after 2020 COVID postponement

**OCTOBER 2021:** Launch of **BootUpPGH**, a new youth technology pathways program

To see more of our history, [click here.](#)



As Community Forge's reach and programming have expanded, our staff has grown to match. With the creation of our nonprofit, Locally Grown, **we've added 5 full-time and 1 part-time staff members to our team** between June and December 2020.



**Michael Skirpan**  
Executive Director



**Bethany Hallam**  
Director of Operations



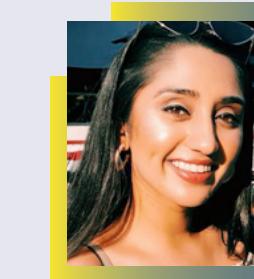
**Amil Cook**  
Director of Technology  
Curriculum & Programs



**Arturo Lozano**  
Facilities Manager



**Herman Johnson**  
Business Development  
Program Manager



**Amber Chaudhry**  
Advancement Associate



**Glenn Ford**  
Hub Coordinator

Community Forge provides services and support for marginalized populations including racial and ethnic minorities, women, unemployed and low-income adults, and adolescents. **Here's how we make a difference:**

**\$30,983**  
**raised**

for the community  
through our  
**COVID-19 Emergency  
Relief Fund**

**100+**  
**hours**

of free consulting  
provided to local  
COVID-19 relief  
services

**600+**  
**hours**

of business coaching  
and technical  
assistance given to  
program participants

**150+**  
**youths**

served through  
career readiness,  
athletic, and after-  
school programming

**50+**  
**businesses**

supported annually  
• **85%** Black-owned  
• **90-95%** experiencing  
revenue growth

**7**  
**active jobs**

created by Forge  
Members 2019-2021  
5 jobs created within  
Bloom business incubator

*Impact metrics recorded between January 2019 and December 2021.*

# FORGING CONNECTIONS



The Community Forge facility is home to a thriving ecosystem of aligned non-profits, new and established entrepreneurs, local artists, and programmatic partners—our **network of members**.

Without reliable access to critical tools and resources, designated development spaces, and knowledgeable mentors, many up-and-coming entrepreneurs and creators struggle to build foundations for success. Through our Member program and newly-launched Entrepreneur Hub, Community Forge offers Wilkinsburg's BIPOC innovators an encouraging environment designed to help them flourish.

We provide participating Members with a host of utilities and assistance geared toward meeting the needs of small business owners and artists, including:

- Affordable space rentals, including full-room private offices and co-working hot desks in our Entrepreneur Hub
- Access to the Entrepreneur Hub's amenities, including the Atrium coffee lounge, meeting rooms, quiet workspaces, workshop area, and seminar room
- Referrals for professional services
- In-house business coaching
- In-house expert consultants for specialized technical assistance
- Discounted access to our business management courses on operations, bookkeeping, and sales/marketing strategy
- Multimedia, graphic, and brand asset development
- A/V production studio (coming in 2022)

We're proud to support a diverse array of businesses and artists—among our roster of Members, you'll find community violence prevention organizations, restaurateurs, elder care services, theater companies, and recording studios. By building pathways for independent creators to access professional development resources, we're helping our Members grow in confidence and achieve their goals while opening doors to collaboration. **The result: Wilkinsburg's most creative minds are empowered to share their passion and give back to the community they call home.**

To help our Members keep momentum during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, we paused all rent payments between March and June of 2020. We also provided waivers to any participating businesses in need for the following 12 months; we absorbed \$30,000 in forgone revenue to ensure that all Members could meet the challenge of the moment with confidence and stability.

**"I went to elementary school at the former Johnston Elementary School, now Community Forge. Seeing offices that were once the classrooms I learned in connected me to their cause deeply.**

When I became part of the family at Community Forge, the way that they loved on me with help from various different people—Francis, Yasmin, Bethany, Mike, Amil, Herman—they were so willing to constantly stay in the loop with my progress. No one ever doesn't have time for me. They have all the time for me and for my small business, and that is what makes being a member here so valuable."



## Anthony Rose

HUB MEMBER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, STGGTS LLC



## Donald Robinson

ANCHOR MEMBER & OWNER OF  
**GLOBAL HUMAN PERFORMANCE;**  
COMMUNITY FORGE BOARD MEMBER

## ANCHOR MEMBERS

4EverCharmyWorld Childcare  
Breathe Easy Independent Living Services  
Bricolage Production Company  
Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)

Eforever  
Global Human Performance  
Gwen's Girls  
Meter Feeder

Office of Violence Prevention  
Pittsburgh Learning Commons  
Wilkinsburg Athletic Association  
Xpogo

## HUB MEMBERS

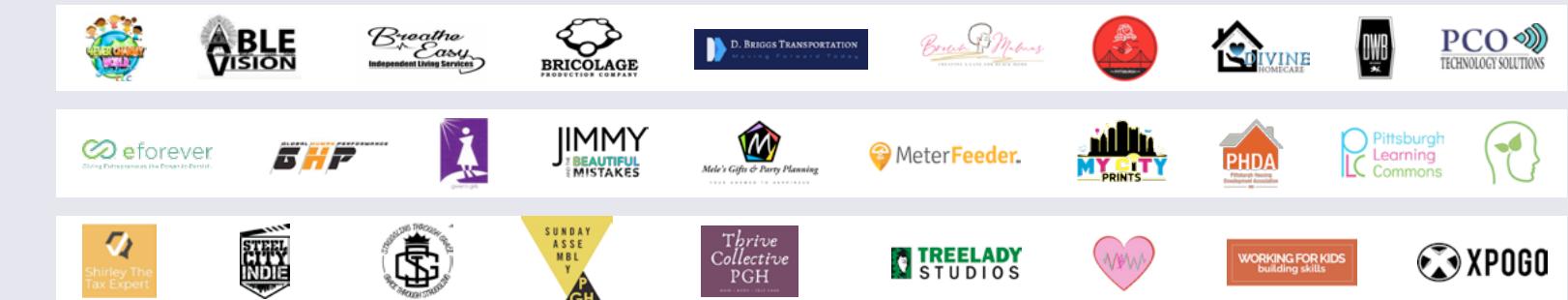
AbleVision | Andre Scott  
BBQ / Ingenuity at Work  
Briggs Transportation  
Brown Mamas  
Divine Home Care and Associates  
Driving While Black Studios  
Ed Shumba PCO Technology Solutions  
Jimmy & The Beautiful Mistakes (Artist)

Mele's Gifts & Party Planning  
PHDA  
Rip Allen  
STEAM Dream  
STG, GTS (Anthony Rose)  
Shirley Muhammad  
Something Healthy  
Steel City Indie

Studio East  
Sunday Assembly  
Tech Help Desk  
Thrive Collective  
Treelady Studios  
VBW Training Services  
Walking Alone and Together  
Working For Kids: Building Skills

**"It's been great watching the Forge grow and being able to see the organization create more structures to help.**

It's gone from a small organization and ballooned to serve a lot more people by creating programs that are timely—for example, Bloom 2.0 getting businesses back on their feet during the re-opening after the peak of the pandemic. The Forge has been great as a space that allows for businesses to grow and learn without hurting badly, taking losses and providing them a bubble so they are able to bounce back. More formal leases don't have that support."



# FORGING PATHWAYS

Our programs were created to help Wilkinsburg residents of all ages and our region's disinvested communities tap into their passions, cultivate life-enriching skills, and form social connections rooted in a community of support.

## THE BLOOM PROGRAM

Bloom is Community Forge's annual business incubator, an 8-month program offering owners of local small businesses coaching, strategy development, professional services, networking, education, and financial investments. First piloted in 2019 with a cohort of eight entrepreneurs, we expanded the program in 2020 to directly address challenges that arose with the COVID-19 pandemic.

This new chapter—Bloom 2.0—has proven to be a great success for participants and for Community Forge. Our 2020-2021 Bloom cohort expanded to include 30 businesses, reflecting an increased need for pandemic support within the local community. **The 28 businesses that fully graduated saw increased revenue**, a testament to the power of Bloom's forward-thinking business coaching techniques.

### 2020-2021 BLOOM PARTICIPANTS

412 Clean Team  
Breathe Easy Independent Living Services  
Briggs Transportation  
Clean & Classy Candle Co.  
Cloud Gate Pittsburgh  
CM Financial  
Cobbler World  
Cuddly's LLC  
Dirty Birds Chicken

Driving While Black Records  
Each One Teach One  
Espirations Greeting Cards  
Global Human Performance  
Healthilicious  
IMIHI Design  
Kin of Duncan  
Mele's Party Planning  
My City Prints

Official Entertainment  
Reset Fitness  
Roland Ford Productions  
Royally Fit  
Self Care Señorita  
Tri-State Electronics Recycling, LP  
Ulead Leadership



*Click a Bloom participant's portrait to hear their story in their own words.*

**Revenue increases for Bloom participants ranged from 2% to 2000%.**

Not a single business in our cohort experienced financial loss or closure caused by complications from COVID-19.

**Average monthly revenue increase:  
\$4,230**

Cuddy's LLC, a Black-owned restaurant, saw a monthly profit increase from \$8,000 to \$15,000. My City Prints increased monthly profits from \$100 to \$2,000.

**100% of participants graduated with income taxes up to date.**

At the start of the program, only 10% of cohort members reported that their taxes were current. Tax management was built into the curriculum to keep Bloom entrepreneurs on top of their tax needs moving forward.

**"Without Community Forge, I don't think I'd be able to come across a lot of opportunities that are out there. In a community like Wilkinsburg, there are people that really need these opportunities. It's been a blessing."**



## YOUTH LEADERSHIP COUNCIL

A small team of young Wilkinsburg residents who serve as decision-makers at Community Forge.



The YLC was first organized in the fall of 2018 to provide local youth with a platform to have a voice within Community Forge and access to mentorship. Over the years, the YLC has held between 5-10 members consistently, often accompanied by other peers. They have been directly involved in planning events and volunteering at our community events. One of their biggest projects was working with Pittsburgh Learning Commons and Stefan Gruber at CMU to support the redesign of the Community Forge Playground—which just was funded to their vision!

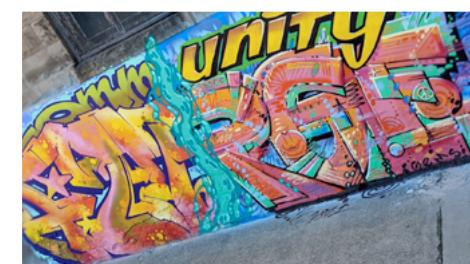
**In March 2020, the YLC were invited to participate in the National League of Cities Conference in Washington, D.C.** Alongside Executive Director Mike Skirpan, the YLC gave a presentation on Community Forge's youth-inclusive approach to economic development. The group also ran focus workshops on participatory budgeting and the need for youth voices in program development.

The YLC met through the pandemic, adapting to an outdoor meeting schedule. In the summer of 2020, they planned and held a successful **Community Drive-In Movie Fundraiser**, giving locals an opportunity to safely gather and share an evening of family fun.



## FORGE FEST

ForgeFest is our annual celebration of and for our amazing community.



From BBQ cookouts to music festivals headlined by the neighborhood's brightest talents, ForgeFest is a highlight of Wilkinsburg's calendar each year. After the pandemic forced us to cancel in 2020, we were thrilled to relaunch the Fest in 2021 with Driving While Black Record's Jordan Montgomery and Jacque Mae acting as co-producers and headliners. **Over 300 people came out** for a day of fantastic performances, live mural painting and art installations, a great array of local businesses and food vendors, and opportunities to get to know the folks behind the Forge.

## MONEY MOVES

In September 2021, Community Forge launched **Money Moves, a personal finance management and accountability class** focused on long-term financial planning, understanding credit systems, and setting achievable goals. Participants pay a \$50 enrollment fee—a sample investment—and upon completion of all classes and coursework, they receive a return of up to \$150.

Eight participants graduated from our first Money Moves cohort, successfully completing the course and receiving returns on their initial investments. In 2022, Money Moves will incorporate additional courses covering key business and finance topics including **bookkeeping, operations, technology for entrepreneurs, sales and marketing strategy, and business leadership and accountability**.



## BOOTUPPGH

Community Forge's newest program is a technology pathways initiative geared toward children and young adults who want to explore the possibility of building their future with technology.

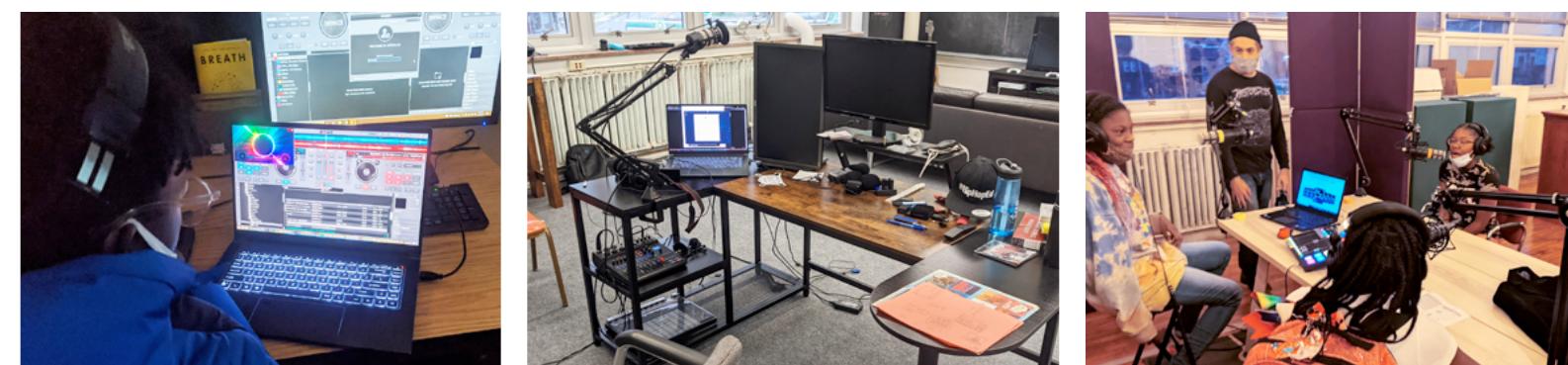


BootUpPGH is headquartered in a tech-enabled space at Community Forge—a former classroom transformed to facilitate **creativity, exploration, community interaction, and youth empowerment**.

Launched in October 2021, BootUpPGH is a hybrid online and in-person program that helps young people with a passion for technology start to build practical skills to give them an educational and professional advantage. **Our long-term goal is to create a pipeline that connects participants with introductory career placement opportunities within the tech sector and related fields.**

BootUpPGH provides young innovators with resources and encouraging guidance:

- Collaborative tech-focused activities including **music and podcast production and engineering, mobile app and website development, graphic design, and competitive e-sports and gaming**
- State-of-the-art facilities including **VR headsets, high-end computers, and a media production lab**
- An active ecosystem of livestreams and online discussion channels for remote education and support
- Drop-in hours at BootUpPGH HQ



**In the first three months of operation, 42 youths have participated in BootUpPGH programming.** Response has been so enthusiastic that we've been supporting teachers at Propel Homestead in hosting a BootUp classroom where we are piloting a livestreamed in-school version of our program.

**BootUpPGH is partnering with local and national educators and institutions:**

- CMU Professor Christina Harrington, an expert in Speculative Design and Afrofuturism, holds Speculative Design workshops co-facilitated by BootUpPGH and research leads from the EHI Lab.
- Introductory course on technology engagement will be taught at Propel Schools via Twitch, BootUpPGH's digital streaming platform.
- Resilient Coders, an organization providing people of color with software engineer training. BootUpPGH interviewed alumnus Zrybea Whitfield and broadcasted to program participants via livestream.

# FORGING HOPE



## COMMUNITY FORGE COVID-19 RELIEF REPORT

Our emergency relief fund received \$20,550 from 90 unique donors, including staff members from the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon, and Google.

At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, Community Forge launched a dedicated **COVID Emergency Relief Fund**. This fund was created to help local entrepreneurs and other community members who were facing extreme financial hardship; the fund also enabled us to build basic functionality for the Forge to operate an emergency food program.

### RELIEF EFFORTS FOR BUSINESS OWNERS

- In partnership with Pittsburgh Learning Commons, we provided business education and coaching to local entrepreneurs. Community Forge also provided **\$3,300** in business stipends, **\$4,300** in accounting services, and **\$2,700** in coaching services.
  - 13 business owners were offered return-to-work coaching support.
  - 12 Black-owned businesses were offered stipends.
- **20 hours of staff time** were volunteered toward assisting member businesses with applications for PA Business Relief Grants.
- Circles Greater Pittsburgh matched **\$5,683** in funds for entrepreneurs.

### RELIEF EFFORTS FOR THE BROADER COMMUNITY

- Community Forge opened public applications for mini-grants to families in need connected with our programs and partners.
  - **\$11,800 in grants were given to 12 households** in Wilkinsburg, Penn Hills, McKeesport, and Homestead.
  - 100% of grants were given to Black households.
- New Sun Rising provided a **\$4,800 grant** to support our emergency food support systems with Feed the Hood and Opening Doors for Youth. During 2020, this collaboration allowed us to serve an average of **100 meals a day** during the height of the lockdown.

## RELIEF EFFORTS THROUGH OUR PROGRAMS

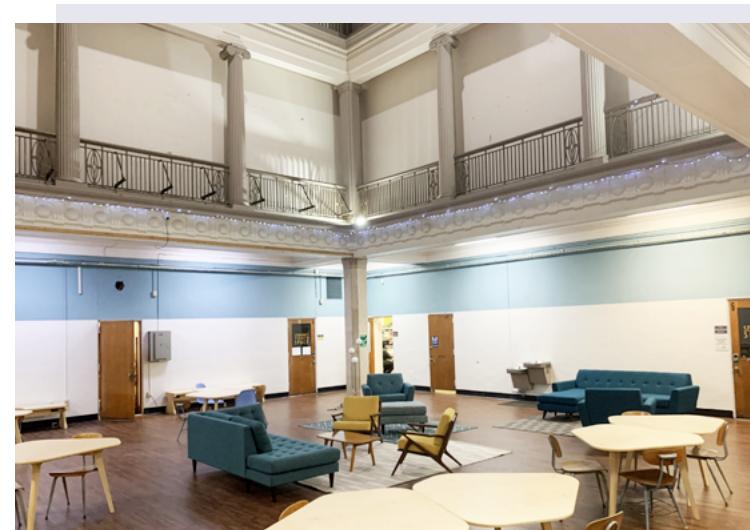
- Bloom pivoted to include strategic business consulting on sustaining business in the face of a changing professional landscape; **100+ hours of consulting** were delivered.
- 9 Bloom businesses obtained COVID emergency relief funds from State or private sources.
- Bloom worked with The Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh to develop signage for businesses that displayed COVID safety protocols.
- **Bloom helped businesses optimize their online presences** to provide alternatives to brick-and-mortar revenue flows during the pandemic.
- **We paused rent payments for Community Forge Members between March and June 2020**, and provided additional waivers to any Members in need for the following 12 months (with the Forge absorbing \$30,000 in forgone revenue).
- To assist Member recovery and resilience, we also offered a subsidized, discounted rent forgoing another \$25,000 of revenues.

Together, we're helping our community  
**bounce back.**



# FORGING THE FUTURE

Looking ahead into 2022, we have big plans: rehabilitating the Community Forge building and continuing the expansion of our programs.



Revitalizing the 45,000-square-foot former elementary school that Community Forge calls home is an intensive undertaking, the work of many dedicated individuals spanning multiple years. In 2022, we've set our focus on these new and ongoing construction projects:

- **A complete refresh of the building's atrium**, converting it into a work and coffee lounge: opening the skylight, a fresh coat of paint, patching old and damaged walls, adding a stage, and purchasing new furniture.
- Converting a classroom space into a **fully-functional multimedia studio** that includes a podcasting setup, vocal booth, and video production station.
- Building a computer lab and streaming studio in another former classroom.
- Creating a new meeting space with two huddle rooms and one large conferencing area.
- Expanding a first-floor seminar and classroom learning space.
- Installing fresh carpet in several rooms.
- Removing and replacing glass brick windows on the first floor—nearly a century old and due for modernization!



## PLAYGROUND REDEVELOPMENT

The plan to refurbish the deteriorating former playground has received a major investment from the Richard King Mellon Foundation and will begin work in 2022 following the specifications set out by our community. Community Forge plans to hold public, family-friendly events at this and other outdoor spaces, and visitors will be free to use the playground for play and gathering.



## ENTREPRENEUR HUB & NEW MEMBERSHIP MODEL

Our Hub began as a system of co-working commons and resource rooms found throughout our building, furnished and designed for productivity and collaboration. Over time, we have shifted the focus of the Hub to become a centralized, year-round business service facility. Redefining the intention of the Hub—and expanding its function as a physical space for meeting and making—is a critical piece of our building rehabilitation and programmatic plan going forward. As renovations complete during 2022, we look forward to welcoming Members to explore and enjoy our new entrepreneur-focused amenities.



## BOOTUP PRODUCTION STUDIO & EXPANSION

Over the coming year, we anticipate expanding BootUpPGH's offerings from introductory-level tech skills to a broader curriculum including more advanced, specialized training. We're building partnerships with leading tech companies,

bootcamps, and local universities to support pathways to paid training, internships, and other crucial early career opportunities. We also plan to launch an in-house production studio, offering audio, video, graphic, and multimedia services to our Members and the public in 2022. This will help us keep our tech programs sustainable while providing paid work opportunities for talented BootUpPGH participants.

*Please contact us at [hello@forge.community](mailto:hello@forge.community) if any of these initiatives interest you or your organization.*



# GET INVOLVED

## Sustaining a Community Hub Takes a Village.

Our ability to keep showing up for Wilkinsburg's youth, families, artists, and local businesses relies upon your financial support. Your dollars will go directly to supporting community programming, beautifying and rehabilitating our grounds for all to enjoy, and subsidizing our partner community service organizations. Community Forge is a space made to facilitate social action and community togetherness. When you invest in our work, we can invest in the people who are making a difference.

Visit [www.linktr.ee/communityforge](http://www.linktr.ee/communityforge) to pledge your support today!

## Be Part of Our Amazing Community.

**Planning an event or program? Host it at the Forge!** In 2022, we'll resume renting out our facilities for private events and programs. It's an ideal venue for workshops, conferences, seminars, or even parties!

**Become a Member at Community Forge.** Move your business or non-profit organization to our building and join a supportive network of up-and-coming local entrepreneurs making their mark on Allegheny County.



Locally Grown D/B/A  
Community Forge  
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Community Forge's critical work would not be possible without the support of our funding partners:

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