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Hill District CEC prepares for soft opening at Blakey Center

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Kirk Holbrook, director of Pitt's Hill District Community Engagement Center, is ready to show off the renovated spaces, like this classroom, in the center's new home in the Blakey Center. (Aimee Obidzinski | University of Pittsburgh)

By DONOVAN HARRELL

Kirk Holbrook began working in the Blakey Program Center 10 years ago, mentoring and teaching 20 to 30 children each day in the Hill District.

The building's namesake, Bill Blakey, who passed away in 2014, was a major influence on Holbrook and the work he would end up doing for the next 20 years. Blakey spent more than six decades as director of the building's previous tenant, the Hill House Association.

"Mr. Blakey was a friend ... a mentor, an example of what it means to be a man that cares about the community," said Holbrook, director of Pitt's Hill District Community Engagement Center. "And there's nothing he loved more than the Hill District."

As Holbrook, who once ran the CEC out of a temporary office in the Bedford Hope Center, prepares for the soft opening of the Hill District CEC next month in the same building his work began in, he can't help feeling like his work has come full circle.

"I think Mr. Blakey would be proud that the space has been activated, and I'm a key part of that activation," he said.

The soft opening will take place in the center from 3 to 5 p.m. May 14 and from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. May 15. It was originally planned for April 23 and 24, but a recent spike in COVID-19 cases in the region led the University to change its risk posture from Guarded to Elevated Risk, pushing the opening the back, Holbrook said.

Renovations on the building began in January 2020, but the pandemic also delayed the construction process until it wrapped up in February, Holbrook said.



The Blakey Center space for the Hill District Community Engagement Center now includes a conference room. (Aimee Obidzinski | University of Pittsburgh)

With the new space, Holbrook's staff will continue to grow. He's already brought on a new outreach coordinator and will open up a receptionist position soon.

Similar to the model in the Homewood Community Engagement Center, Pitt students from the School of Social Work and school organizations will help provide services to the community through the Hill District CEC.

Holbrook said the programming for the opening is still being finalized, but it will be live-streamed to the Pitt Hill District CEC Facebook page. Holbrook is expecting about 70 people from the community to visit the center in person if the pandemic doesn't alter plans again.

The soft opening will highlight some of the center's work during the pandemic and will show the space's potential once it's up and running.

Participants will have the opportunity to tour the 9,000-square-foot space, which includes six rooms, each equipped with audio-visual equipment for multi-purpose programs. The space also has a conference room and computer lab.

The STEAM Studio

The opening also will feature the unveiling of the STEAM Studio report, which details the University's plans to make the New Grenada Theater the CEC's permanent home. When it's finished, the CEC will double in size to 20,000 square feet, Holbrook said.

This report will highlight how the STEAM studio will work with programs already present in the community to create programming around science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics.

The work around STEAM won't be confined to just the CEC's spaces, Holbrook said, and the CEC will continue to partner with local schools to determine the needs of workforce development building for young people.

"Pitt's presence in the community through the CEC is intended to elevate the overall STEAM ecosystem in the neighborhood," Holbrook said.

Further, STEAM won't just be an acronym for "science," "technology," "engineering," "arts" and "mathematics," Holbrook said. The letters in the acronym can be switched out to suit presenters' needs and programming.

For example, the "E" could represent "entertainment" or "entrepreneurship," Holbrook said, depending on the programming. The "A" could mean "architecture" or "agriculture," and the "M" could stand for "music" or "media."

STEAM disciplines will continue to be important, as the U.S. economy focuses on innovation in life sciences and technology, Holbrook said.

The CEC's work has and will continue to be developed with multiple disciplines and people of various age groups in mind, he added.

"Part of it is sparking interest in young people, part of it is meeting the needs of residents who maybe are looking to transition into careers or just entering the workforce," Holbrook said. "It's (about) how can we utilize our STEAM studio spaces in our Community Engagement Center, to really create these pipelines to opportunity."

While the home for the STEAM studio will be new, the concept goes back to 2016 and is rooted in a community-based idea led by the Hill Community Development Corporation.

The Community Development Corporation wanted to reimagine what the New Grenada Theater could look like once it was repurposed. After the it laid the foundation, Pitt was eventually selected as a new possible tenant that could help bring the vision to life through partnerships with community organizations long present in the community.

Holbrook said he's hopeful that a groundbreaking on the CEC's presence in the theater will take place sometime in late May to early June, and the move will be finished by fall 2022.

How the CEC has impacted the community

Since Holbrook took on his role in 2019, the CEC's work has helped address skepticism and mend tensions between the community and Pitt, which acquired 7.5 acres of land in the Hill District in 2007, where the Robinson Court housing development used to be located, that became the Petersen Sports Complex.

That displaced many people who are still missed today, said Donnie Kyte, a lifelong Hill District resident, entrepreneur and member of the CEC's community advisory council. Even though the housing complex was torn down several years before Pitt bought the land, the debate over how to use that space raised tensions among community members, and it was on Pitt, Kyte said, to help "amend some of what you've broken."

Thanks to Holbrook's work, the community's perception of Pitt has improved. Now, Kyte said, it's on residents to make use of the resources Pitt and the CEC have brought to the community.

The pandemic also forced the CEC to adapt to an online environment. Hill District residents and say the CEC's efforts during the pandemic have changed resident's overall perceptions of the CEC and, as a result, Pitt.

"There was a lot of work that was organized through the CEC that positively impacted the community in the height of the crisis," said Rev. Paul Abernathy, director of FOCUS Pittsburgh, an organization that helps create programs to deal with the trauma these communities have experienced.

Abernathy added that the Pitt CEC's presence has filled a lot of needs left in the community after the Hill House ended its operations in 2019.

"In many ways, the Hill House not only did things in the community, but they were the space where the committee convened," Abernathy said. "And it seems that CEC has inadvertently assumed that role, which is really fascinating."

Abernathy was grateful for the CEC's work around the COVID-19 vaccine, especially in addressing community members' hesitancy around getting the vaccine.

The CEC, working with other community organizations, helped distribute the vaccine to more than 1,000 people in the community earlier this year.

Other residents praised the CEC for helping keep the community connected in an online environment.

The CEC provided remote programming for children in grades 3 to 12 and to seniors in the community. It also participated in the Beyond the Laptop program, in partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools, to help give children access to devices and a steady internet connection.

The CEC partnered with other previously existing organizations such as Neighborhood Allies, Level Up 412, to help give seniors access to devices and help teach them to use the devices.

The online programming has served more than 200 people in the community since October 2020, Holbrook said. All program participants received a wi-fi hotspot, and up to a year of internet access.

"Those kinds of things are priceless in this community to make sure everybody is connected," said Brenda Tate, a lifelong Hill District resident and member of the CEC's community advisory council. "And although we've lost the people connectedness, Kirk in the CEC ... has figured out a way to reconnect the people in the community," she said, adding that it was particularly beneficial for seniors like her.

Holbrook said that thoughtful collaboration between the CEC and existing community organizations and advisors will be key to the CEC's continued success and helping remove systemic barriers for Hill District residents.

Holbrook said now that the initial concepts of what the Hill District CEC could be have been realized, it solidifies Pitt's presence as a community.

"I really feel grateful for the journey that we've been on," Holbrook said. "And grateful for all the community members who have been on this journey with me step by step since day one."

Donovan Harrell is a writer for the University Times. Reach him at धारrell@pitt.edu or 412-383-9905.

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