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## With new director on board, work begins on Hill District CEC facility

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The New Granada Theater space for the Hill District Community Engagement Center will provide more space for a STEAM studio, which the CEC has been holding at its current space for several months for kids in grades 3-8. (Johnathan Wright | University of Pittsburgh)

**By SHANNON O. WELLS**

With a recent groundbreaking ceremony, a newly hired director in place and summer programs going full steam from its current facility, the new Hill District Community Engagement Center is morphing from a promising proposal to momentum-fueled reality.

Ground was broken on May 25 to kick off renovations for the Historic New Granada Theater and adjacent spaces at 2007 Centre Ave. The project that will allow the CEC to move from its current residence in the Blakey Program Center on Wiley Avenue. Adding to the forward

motion is Kelly Protho, who started as the CEC's director in mid-March after serving as a senior applied learning and development specialist with the Allegheny Department of Health and Human Services.



Keith Caldwell

Calling the renovation project "on schedule," Keith Caldwell, executive director of place-based initiatives in the Office of Engagement and Community Affairs, finds a lot to be enthused about regarding Pitt's expanding Hill District presence.

"We are excited to move into the New Granada in fall of 2024," he said of the building constructed as a Knights of Pythias temple in 1927. "The highlight of the (groundbreaking) event was community leaders, funders, University leaders and residents standing shoulder-to-shoulder celebrating what has been decades of work done by the Hill Community Development Corporation and Marimba Milliones (New Granada's president and CEO) to reopen this catalytic space to the community."

Doubling the Hill District CEC's current size to 20,000 square feet, the Granada space also will include a STEAM studio to provide programming and opportunities based on science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics. Pitt will serve as an anchor tenant, providing classrooms, offices, additional spaces and programming for the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics, the School of Social Work, jazz studies and computer literacy classes.

The community engagement centers are the most visible aspect of Pitt's Neighborhood Commitments initiative, a minimum 15-year plan for investment, infrastructure, programming and dedicated staff in neighborhoods like Homewood, the Hill District and Hazelwood, the location for a CEC now in the planning stages.

Established in 2019, the Hill District CEC serves as a catalyst for collaboration and opportunity between Pitt and its surrounding neighborhoods. From the Blakey Program Center, the CEC offers various programs, educational opportunities and events for Hill District residents.

## Residents in the driver's seat

Calling the theater restoration a "very complex endeavor," Caldwell admitted it's taken considerable time and focus to balance the physical work involved while "developing a comprehensive re-use plan that honors its history while making space for the future of the Hill District," he said. "The Hill (Community Development Corp.) has woven together a committed set of partners that have made the project possible. ...

"We are excited about expanding the programs and partnerships that we currently offer, within the revitalized space," he added. "Having larger space allows for more programs like Reimagining Reentry to continue to use our space for each starting cohort and dedicated spaces for our STEAM Studio, the Jazz program's Jazz Incubator, and the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics to have their studio, community engagement and performance spaces."



Kelly Protho

The Hill CEC's current staff of four will continue their roles when the New Granada space is complete. "Though small, the team is mighty," Caldwell said, noting that "all our CECs have additional community-engaged staff and faculty from the various academic departments who work out of the CEC as their primary location."

Kelly Protho, who in her role at the Allegheny health department conducted trainings on advancing racial equity and practical applications of trauma-informed care, said her experience should serve her well in taking the Hill District CEC to a dynamic new level.

"My focus is to not only build strong relationships and rapport within the community, faculty and staff, but also growing our programming for both youth and adults," she said. "There are new digital programs, platforms and skill sets that are changing every day, and I want our programs to offer an outlet where our residents are not being left behind but are in the driver's seat."

Protho, who earned a political science degree at Hampton University in Virginia, said as someone "fascinated with history," the CEC being an anchor tenant in the New Granada is particularly exciting. "The fact that the building itself was designed by a Black architect (Louis Bellinger) — an HBCU graduate (of Howard University) — the countless number of legendary artists who performed in the space, and it being a centralized hub in the community gives me hope for what this space can offer to the community once it's completed."

## STEAM of the summer

While the renovation work moves ahead, the CEC's STEAM summer camps are up and running for six weeks. The Hill District CEC has partnered with Citizen Science Lab, Pitt's Bioengineering department, Toyz Electronics and Pitt IT to facilitate camps for youth in grades 3-8.

"Our STEAM studio is a direct outgrowth of the #NewGranadaSTEAM planning process that was led by the Hill CEC in 2016," Caldwell explained. "Upon deciding to be the anchor tenant within the New Granada, we were eager to be a partner in bringing about some of the goals identified within that planning process. We then expanded the conversation with support from the PNC Foundation to bring together more than 30 community-based organizations and academic departments to envision what Pitt could do collaboratively in the area of STEAM."

One of the most tangible outcomes, he noted, was planning a STEAM Studio and an associated set of programs that focus on the five STEAM elements as well as digital equity. "The last element, digital equity, is a core aspect of the programming we do at the Hill CEC and is generously supported by Neighborhood Allies. We focus our work on aligning University resources and expertise with community goals and wisdom."

The CEC recently purchased two 3D printers for the studio and plans to create classes and programming based on the acquisitions. "We look forward to having a space that will expand our STEAM educational opportunities for children in the community," Caldwell said, "as well as expand opportunities for our adults and seniors."

The CEC will bring its adult computer-literacy programming back this fall, followed by hosting EmployHER Pittsburgh in October for a career fair. The full slate of activities at the Blakey Center, he added, includes programs “across the lifespan,” such as introduction to trades for people re-entering society after incarceration through Reimagine Reentry, workshops and classes for adults (Communiversity) and seniors (Crossing the Digital Divide), adult computer programming, services for job seekers, events that engage Black-owned businesses with Pitt contracts, and more, Caldwell said.

## Hazelwood CEC

As Hill District programs hum along, Caldwell continues to focus on the two-year planning project to establish a Hazelwood CEC along the Monongahela River. Supported by Heinz Endowments, the process involves intentionally planning with both University and community partners, including the Center for Life, ways to leverage the life sciences developments from Pitt’s BioForge project “in a way that strengthens the community,” Caldwell said last fall.

Areas of focus include life-sciences infrastructure to support K-12 STEM education, workforce development opportunities for Hazelwood residents and inclusive community development.

“We are excited to co-locate with the Center of Life in their new headquarters slated for Hazelwood Green,” Caldwell said. “Along with several community organizations, the Pitt CEC in Greater Hazelwood will include dedicated spaces for the Pitt Office of Child Development and the School of Nursing’s Nurse Practitioner Clinic.”

Caldwell’s office also is engaged in a two-year project with community leaders to identify unique opportunities to leverage Life Sciences Pittsburgh to advance community. “That planning will be the foundation of our Greater Hazelwood CEC. We will have participation from disciplines across the University, and a wide network of community organization collaborators that will bring to life a universe of programming.”

Caldwell, who took on his CEC-based role in spring 2022 after 14 years on the School of Social Work faculty, praised the role of Pitt’s Neighborhood Commitments and the University’s devotion to engaging closely with the community it serves and nurtures.

“The commitments — focused on the Oakland, Homewood, Hill District, and Greater Hazelwood neighborhoods of Pittsburgh — provide long-term commitments of staffing, infrastructure and coordination to facilitate mutually beneficial collaborations between Pitt and the local community,” he said, adding that CECs anchoring Homewood, the Hill District and soon Hazelwood provide “vibrant, welcoming facilities.”

“However, our work in these communities extends well beyond the four walls of the CEC. Pitt’s neighborhood commitments extend to the work we do in community centers, school buildings, churches, doctor’s offices, libraries and every manner of site you can think of.”

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