



Endearing faces of children such as Shawn Sanders, 3, foreground; Arayah Bryant, 3, rear right; and Eliana Horne, 3, rear, help fuel Hosanna House's efforts to address a range of community needs in Wilkinsburg.

# Open house

WHEN HOSANNA HOUSE IN WILKINSBURG OPENS ITS DOORS, IT ALSO OPENS ITS HEART TO THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY AND STRIVES TO MAKE EVERYONE FEEL AT HOME. BY ELWIN GREEN

Ten years ago, Jerome Drake, then 13, was a devout fan of “Robot Wars,” the television series imported from the BBC that featured homemade mechanical gladiators going head-to-head in noisy combat. The show was just part of an incursion into popular culture by robotics, which had children across the country building robots, picking up lessons in engineering and programming along the way.

But Drake grew up in Wilkinsburg, a once prosperous suburb east of Pittsburgh that had devolved into a community struggling with double-digit population decline, more than a fifth of the residents living below the poverty line, and a violent crime rate higher than those for the state and nation. He was unlikely to experience robots—until Hosanna House, a nonprofit community organization, began offering a robotics program at Wilkinsburg Middle School.

Drake enrolled in the program, and when it was done, he signed up to learn more about robots at Hosanna House’s summer camp, which is conducted at its Sherwood Event Center, a 14-acre former country club that is a stone’s throw from the local highway. Within two years, he was an assistant in the robotics class.

Along the way, Drake became part of Hosanna House’s robotics team, which in 2004 went up against groups from across the Pittsburgh area in a competition called “May Madness.” They brought back an award for the “Most Ingenious Solution” to a robotics challenge. Today, the student has become the teacher: The 23-year-old works in Hosanna

House’s youth center, teaching robotics to kids in grades seven through 12.

Drake’s students are just a small slice of the more than 40,000 people served annually by Hosanna House programs or agencies operating at its facility. Some come to learn. Some come for recreation. Some come to receive help in job hunting. Some come in search of housing or child care. Hosanna House meets all of these needs and more by offering encouragement and support along with services.

It’s this combination of personal touch and community credibility that elevates the organization’s work above many typical social service outreach efforts and has attracted support from The Heinz Endowments, an early partner that has provided \$2.4 million since 1991.

The past two decades have included some tough times, says Marge Petruska, senior director of the Endowments’ Children, Youth & Families Program, but Hosanna House has continued to deliver what the community needs. “Because of their respect in the community and the work they do, we come back to support them,” Petruska explains.



Jerome Drake, far right, gives back to his community by working as a robotics instructor at Hosanna House, where he learned about robotics as a youth. Among the students he teaches in an after-school program are, from left to right, Isaiah Clark, 12; Jayla Snyder, 11; Eli Hicks, 11; Qiydar Muqtadir, 11; Jania Fluit, 12; Emoneah Lee, 12; Breona Pippens, 11; and Rosslin Watson, 13.

Hosanna House Executive Director Leon Haynes III shows his paper heart to youngsters in the organization's child care program. He and other staff reveal their sincerity of heart through their dedication to providing needed services in Wilkinsburg.

Hosanna House, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, was formed in response to a University of Pittsburgh study that recommended the creation of a “one-stop shop” for social services in Wilkinsburg. Bishop Joseph Garlington, pastor of the nondenominational Covenant Church of Pittsburgh, was one of the leaders of the initiative to create Hosanna House and still heads the organization's board. His church once had its main sanctuary on the edge of Wilkinsburg's business district before constructing a larger worship center about two miles away.

As a member of Covenant, Leon E. Haynes III became a volunteer with Hosanna House before the organization moved to its present home, a former middle school. When the opportunity arose to become its first executive director, he stepped forward: “I got sick and tired of being sick and tired of all the societal ills that affect poor folk, young folk and urban communities . . . I wanted to be a change agent and to make a difference, and I felt like it was a calling.”

The first priority for the organization was not to create any particular programs, says Haynes, but to find out what programs the community wanted and needed. Hosanna House took the common approach of hosting community meetings to hear from residents, yet went to uncommon lengths with it.

“We spent three years of town hall meetings, block parties and surveys to make sure we were doing what the community said it wanted,” explains Haynes.

That depth of input from the community helped to create a sense of ownership among residents that was demonstrated when Hosanna House eventually acquired the Horner Middle School building on Wallace Avenue in 1993. The building had been vacant for years, and when the call was put out for volunteers to spend a day working to help transform the place into an attractive community center, some 500 people showed up.

“What made it possible were all the sectors inside the community and outside the community,” Haynes says. Government, schools, churches, businesses, foundations, “all sectors came together and rallied.” People kept showing up by the hundreds during the 11 years that it took to completely rehab the four-story, 125,000-square-foot building.

Hosanna House continues to serve as the one-stop community site for services that residents called for during its three-year startup period. These include early childhood education, youth mentoring, job placement services for the disabled, and medical

and dental services. In June, the organization won a \$5,000 prize from Maxwell House in the company's “Drops of Good” competition, created to fund high-impact renovation projects by organizations with 501(c)(3) status. The money will go toward the remodeling of an empty room in the Hosanna House building into YUMS Cafe, a coffeehouse that also will serve as a business incubator for local youth.

Besides having a menu of its own programs, Hosanna House provides space for other agencies, ranging from NeighborWorks Western Pennsylvania, which promotes homeownership, to Pennsylvania Virtual Charter School, to the Wilkinsburg Family Support Center, which provides mental health counseling and substance abuse prevention.

Paulette Davis, director of the Wilkinsburg Family Support Center, notes that being a tenant in Hosanna House offers advantages over having a standalone location because it fosters collaboration—some of which may be unplanned. If a Family Support Center client has an emergency need for baby formula, “I walk them around the corner to WIC [Women, Infants and Children],” and that organization may be able to meet the need. Or conversely, one of the other agencies may call Davis: “They say, ‘Can we send somebody to you for diapers?’ and we say, ‘Yep.’”

When Dreda Cutler and her husband began looking for day care services after having their first child, Aundre, eight years ago, they hadn't considered Hosanna House. “We would ride past there every day and didn't know what it was,” she says. Then one day they decided to visit. “It was just like a warm feeling when we walked in the door.”

Hosanna House has been like a home away from home for Aundre ever since he enrolled. He advanced through the day care and child development programs, and now his brother, Cooper, nearly 2, attends its child care, too. “Hosanna House has been wonderful to us,” says Cutler. “It's like a small, close-knit community.”

The Hosanna House story has not been one of uninterrupted ascent, however. Like many nonprofit agencies, it has been tested by a variety of financial difficulties over the years, including a period of poor accounting practices. As a result, even before the recession hit, Hosanna House's revenues fell from almost \$5 million in 2000 to \$2.5 million in 2006, which forced the organization to make adjustments, including layoffs. Staffing dropped from 86 employees in the mid-2000s to the current 46, and about 20 percent of the organization's programs were cut.



“We focused  
on programs that we were  
very good at doing.” **Leon Haynes III**, executive director of Hosanna House

“We focused on programs that we were very good at doing,” with the quality of service being affirmed by outside evaluations, Haynes notes.

At the same time, the needs in the community continued unabated, even increasing in some cases. Hosanna House responded by leasing space to other providers such as Susquehanna Rehabilitation Services, which took over workforce development programming, and East Liberty Family Health Center, which now operates the dental center in the Hosanna House building.

“[Clients] didn’t leave Hosanna House because they were tapping into as many other services as they could,” Haynes explains. “That’s why we were the right partner [for other agencies]—we had the people there who could use the services.”

These changes also made a positive impression on funders, says Petruska of the Endowments, which, along with the McCune and Richard King Mellon foundations, provided transition funding from 2007 through 2010 as Hosanna House developed a new service model.

“You really saw the board and Leon take control of a financial crisis,” she adds. “They had to do dramatic restructuring . . . It was really hard work!”

Henry Beukema, executive director of the McCune Foundation, which has granted more than \$6 million to Hosanna House since the organization began, credits the board and staff members who stuck with the nonprofit through the difficult times with providing organizational stability and character.

“If you were putting together a list of organizations that learn from experiences, good and bad,” he says, “Hosanna House would clearly be on that list, and probably near the top.”

# “Hosanna House has been wonderful to us.”



Photos: Elizabeth Vincent Photography



# It's like a small, close-knit community.”

**Dreda Cutler**, parent of sons attending Hosanna House child care

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Among the evidence that the organization learned how to turn trials into triumphs is the increase in individuals seeking services at the center — whether provided by Hosanna House or another agency. The numbers rose from 25,314 in 2001 to 40,400 last year. From 2005 to 2011, the percentage of the organization's revenue from lease contracts grew from 16 percent to 44 percent.

Hosanna House's restructuring to address financial challenges served as a precursor to its current efforts to expand its portfolio by venturing into other areas, such as real estate development, which has been a response to individuals looking to the organization for leadership outside its main operations. It is partnering with the Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation to restore the Crescent Apartments, now renamed Crescent Place, a 27-unit complex nestled in a Wilksburg cul-de-sac. The apartments are “supportive housing,” meaning that Hosanna House has contracted to provide social services for tenants.

A few blocks away sits Peebles Square, which includes six renovated row houses and a block of new single-family homes. For this project, Hosanna House partnered with ACTION Housing, a Pittsburgh-based nonprofit that provides affordable housing as well as educational and employment opportunities to low-income individuals. For buyers who qualify, the three-bedroom homes are being sold at a discounted price, with a forgivable second mortgage, which is a subsidy for low-income homebuyers.

Hosanna House also is making more effective use of its assets by, for instance, leasing space at the Sherwood Center and its main building. Already the Sherwood facility's pool and patio space attracts rental reservations a year in advance for weddings, picnics and other events. Haynes says that, this year, 8,000 to 10,000 people will visit the grounds for such occasions.

Plans call for refurbishing three of the five tennis courts at the Sherwood Center and converting the remaining two into deck hockey surfaces. A plateau north of the tennis courts is expected to be transformed into a combination football field and baseball

field, and a quarter-mile walking trail will be created in the woods at the edge of the property. Haynes hopes that in 2014 the organization will be able to construct a new building to match the clubhouse, expanding Sherwood's meeting space and allowing Hosanna House to generate more revenues.

At the main building, the organization is burnishing its reputation as a convener for important community events. Among those taking place this year in the 6,000-square-foot auditorium have been a conference to connect minority small business owners with government and nonprofit resources, and an Endowments-sponsored symposium on addressing racial inequity in society, which featured noted civil rights scholar John A. Powell.

“This allows people to use our space and leave something behind in terms of revenues,” Haynes says.

Still, Marissa Parks sees the essence of Hosanna House going beyond what can be measured on a bottom line. Parks, a Wilksburg High School alumna, was part of a Covenant Church youth group that helped clean the Hosanna House building before it opened two decades ago. Growing into adulthood, she became the single mother of three sons and took advantage of the child care that she helped to prepare a place for. “I knew the children were safe, and they were taken care of, and I didn't have to worry about that. I was able to focus on finishing school.”

More than child care services, Hosanna House offered encouragement.

“Mr. Leon was always telling me, ‘You can do this. I think you're going to be something,’” recalls Parks, who today is a sales support consultant with Prudential. “I really believe that was one of my big pushes . . . I'm in this great place now, and I honestly give some of the credit to Mr. Leon and to Hosanna House.”

Her sons — Rashad, 14; Marquise, 12; and Darnell, 10 — also continue to enjoy their Hosanna House connection, which includes swimming and learning to play tennis at the Sherwood Event Center.

These relationships are at the heart of Hosanna House, says Haynes. It is committed to the community and driven to help young people develop the character to compete, whether in robotics, swimming, tennis or life.

“When you come to Hosanna House, somebody's going to love on you. And for me, that's the solution. That changes behavior.” *h*

Acquired by Hosanna House in 2003, the 14-acre Sherwood Event Center property enables the organization to provide other groups such as Circle C Youth and Family Services with a facility that can accommodate outdoor recreational activities. Circle C's R U Connected Street Team, a peer-to-peer program for current and former foster children, had its pool party, called The Connection, at the Sherwood Center this year. Opposite page clockwise, Jahliyah Davis enjoys a game of volleyball while Maureasha Butler, below right, gets splashed in the pool. The event also included a session with Shaune Johnson, a recent Slippery Rock University graduate, who encouraged the younger students to strive to achieve their goals.