
UCF Forum

9-9-2020

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STARS Citation

Philp, Katie, "Finding a Sense of Belonging in an Orlando Community" (2020). *UCF Forum*. 418.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/418>

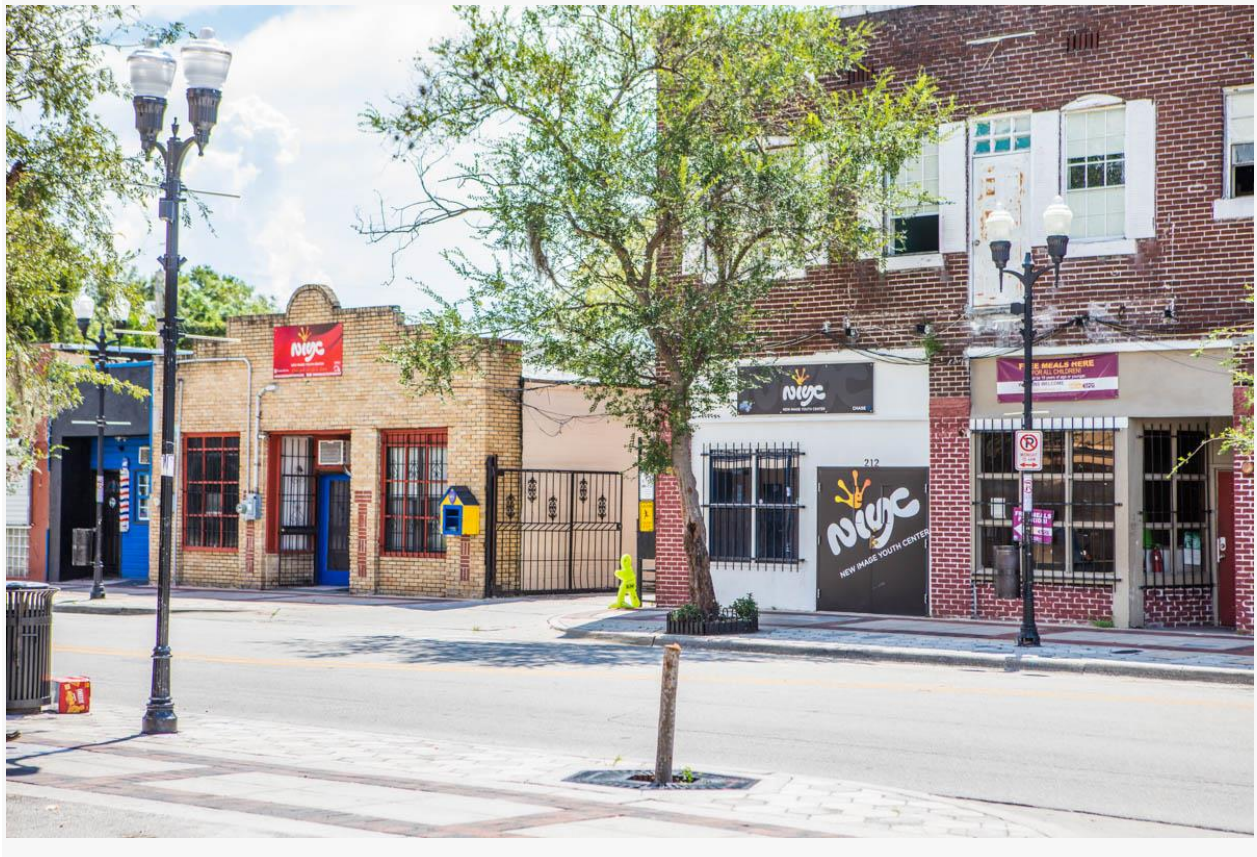
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Finding a Sense of Belonging in an Orlando Community

By Katie Philp
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, September 9, 2020

That welcoming is what hundreds of children have found at a youth center in the Parramore neighborhood.



It's easy enough to miss the unassuming buildings on Parramore Avenue just a few blocks from UCF Downtown. You might walk by on your way to an Orlando City soccer game or overlook the space as your eyes settle on the high-rise apartment towers a few

blocks away. But look carefully, and you'll see the doors to New Image Youth Center. I first saw them myself six years ago, not long after I'd moved to town.

Less than a year earlier, my fiancé and I had bought a house in Pittsburgh, had a great community of family and friends, and were busy planning our wedding. All that changed when a dream-job opportunity unexpectedly arose in Orlando for my new husband. A little over three months later, we were newlyweds in a new town, where my husband left for work each day while I...well, mostly, I cried. A lot.

I hated the weather, the bugs, the smells; my dog died; I was severely allergic to the mold hidden behind the walls of our rental. It was not exactly the honeymoon phase I'd expected.

After months of trying and failing to find a job, a club, a team, anywhere I might belong, I began searching for places to volunteer. A Google query and a few days later, I found myself sitting at a table in one of those inconspicuous buildings on Parramore Avenue, chatting away with Shanta Barton-Stubbs like we were old friends. I learned how she founded New Image when she was just 21, and for the past 10 years had been supporting the children of Parramore year-round through after-school and summer programs.

It wasn't long before I felt like I'd finally found my own little version of 'Cheers' — that place where everyone knows your name — I finally felt like I was home.

While her journey is no doubt remarkable, what I remember most was hearing her vision, about growth for her organization, but most importantly, for her students. When at last I left that afternoon, I was brimming with ideas on how I could support progress towards that vision. I came back later that week, and again after that, and soon my tiny, lonely world began to grow. It wasn't long before I felt like I'd finally found my own little version of 'Cheers' — that place where everyone knows your name — I finally felt like I was home.

That sense of belonging is what Shanta has given hundreds of children (and at least one 30-something) who have walked through the doors of New Image over the past 16 years. I am honored to have been a part of that legacy for the past six and have earned a lifelong friend and extended family in the process. Even though I now work full-time at UCF, I stay connected with my students and the many incredible people who make New Image such a special place.

This is probably a good time to pause and make clear that I do not look like most of my New Image family. I am white, and the majority of our families from New Image are Black. Perhaps it is the starkness of that difference that has made it a topic of natural conversation, or perhaps it is just human nature to be curious. In any case, we've never shied away from difficult, painful, and sometimes funny conversations about race.

These discussions have taken on more gravity in recent months, as our youths are repeatedly subjected to the trauma of watching people who look just like them being shot and killed with impunity. To put it bluntly, they are aware that there is active debate over whether their lives matter.

Right now, I believe New Image Youth Center is more important than ever. When they step inside those doors, our kids are safe. They are free to be the silly, kind, brilliant, loving children we know them to be — even if to the rest of the world some look like grown men. They are free to be unapologetically Black and to be in a space that celebrates them unequivocally. At New Image, there is no doubt that they matter.

But small nonprofits like New Image are subject to the same economic and social forces as the rest of the country, much of which is reeling from the global pandemic. Rents are rising, donations are falling, and there is a fear that those doors that have welcomed so many might not stay open indefinitely. That huge source of security and stability for the children of Parramore could be lost.

To those reading this, I invite you to learn more about a little organization with a big impact and become part of the team dedicated to keeping this safe haven thriving. It is easy to find them on their [website](#) or [Facebook page](#).

But New Image likes to do things with a personal touch. Feel free to contact me if you want to know more.

You'll be welcomed to the family in person when you arrive...just look for those doors on Parramore Avenue.

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