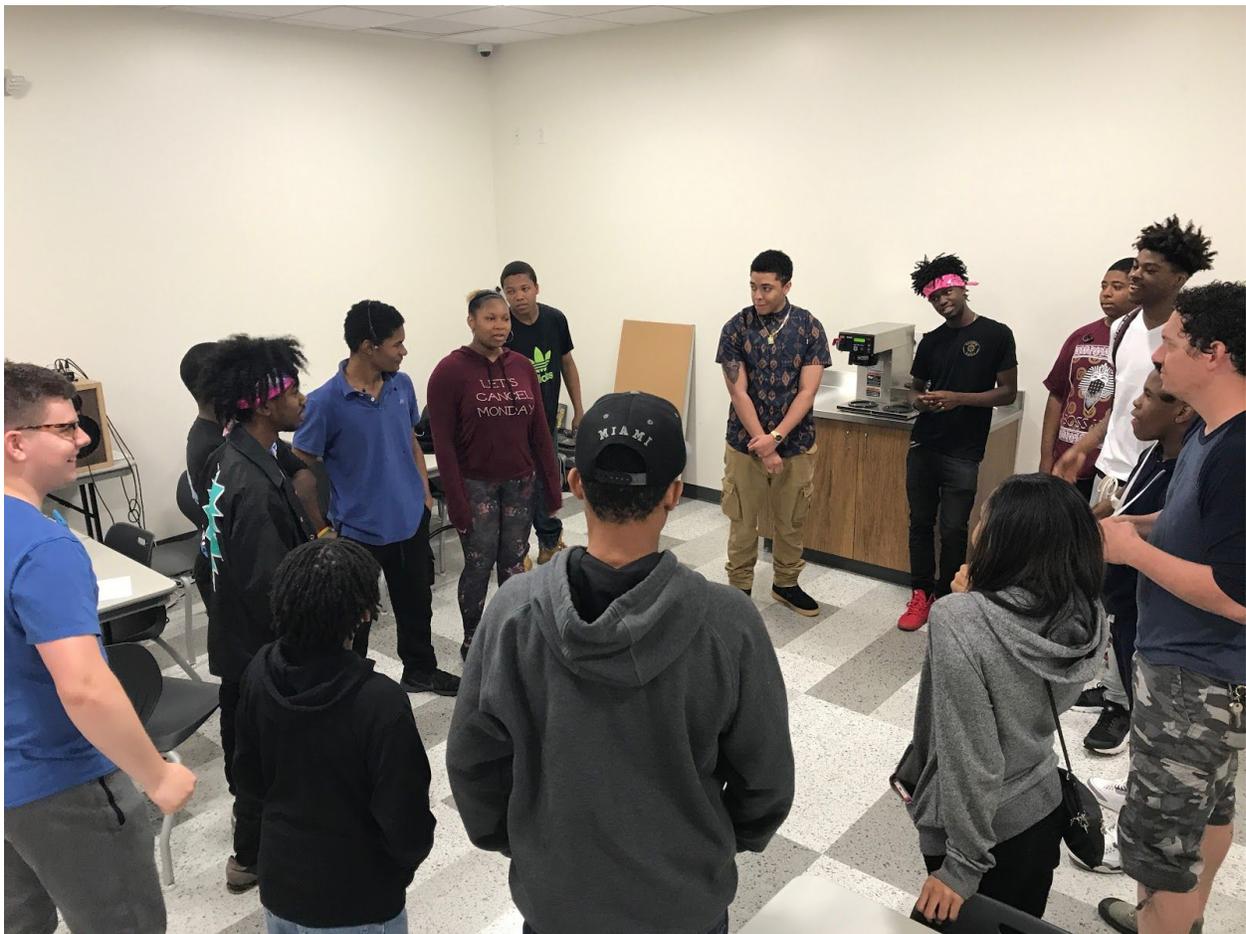


Through the generous support of a Fourth year Miller Art Scholars grant, I was able to immerse myself in non-profit work with Refresh Collective this past summer, a hip-hop based outreach program situated in the heart of my hometown; the city of Cleveland, OH. I served, learned and lived as a student, teacher, administrator, artist and mentor for the program's three, two-week long summer camps or, Fresh Camps. Refresh Collective serves to "refresh the heart of the city through the creative arts and youth development." The breadth of this effort translates to anything from beat-making, lyric-writing, recording, performing, and providing leadership opportunities for students, to working with and learning about fresh food, gardening, dancing and designing and screen-printing t-shirts. Through these activities and countless others, my work with Refresh Collective expanded my skills in leading, navigating power dynamics, arts administration, organization, non-profit work, relationship-building, conflict resolution, recording and music production, lyric-writing, beat-making, dance, exercise, gardening and health-conscious cooking.



*Group exercises at the start of a camp day in East Cleveland*

The system for our Summer leadership plan was solidified at first meeting. We met at the Refresh Collective headquarters, settled in a beautiful, old warehouse studio downtown. Here we agreed upon a three-tiered network comprised of Founder, Project Manager and Intern, Artist Mentors, and Camp Counselors. The collective and our settled-upon summer organizational structure encouraged youth development at the highest levels of operation, offering student team members substantial responsibility and leadership status in the upkeep of each camp. As a team, we were tasked with organizing and leading Fresh Camps in three inner-city neighborhoods. We began in East Cleveland, partnering with a local Salvation Army Center in the community. The second partnership was with a Glenville-based elementary school, and the final collaboration with the Buckeye neighborhood, was run from a community center and home called “The Meeting Place.” In every camp, we worked with approximately twenty-five neighborhood kids between the ages of seven and eighteen, teaching beat-making, lyric-writing, walking them through the recording and producing process, and engaging them with local performance opportunities.



*Students in the Buckeye camp building benches for their outdoor performances*



*The Fresh Camp crew in Glenville*

After every camp, each group of students had an original album written and recorded (three complete albums), and a collaboratively designed and in-house screen printed t-shirt. Over the entirety of the summer, students and youth leadership engaged with a total of twenty-five performance opportunities at local farmers markets, festivals, craft fairs, community events and performance venues. The arc of growth I witnessed in each student through this process was a profound journey in and of itself. The growth I experienced personally was a life-altering gift. It seems the two went hand in hand.



*Students performing at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*

Over the course of three camps, I encountered upwards of seventy students, many of whom came from tumultuous backgrounds and challenging home-lives, that courageously dug into their history and the specificity of their neighborhood and community's conditions each day. They used the art of hip-hop to navigate the tension between both receiving and rebuking elements of their place called home, they learned to acknowledge its brokenness and to celebrate and magnify its wholeness. Together, through music and making, and superior leadership on behalf of the Refresh Collective staff, we boldly approached an array of topics from fresh foods and healthy eating, to food deserts, police/youth relations in the city, race-based violence, gangs, poverty, pollution, lead-poisoning and gun violence. These students were a sort of every-day warriors, meeting difficulty and hope head-on, I was humbled by their joy, tenacity and outstanding talent.



*Students recording and listening to their new song*

Throughout my time with Refresh Collective, I was pushed to perform my original work more frequently and publically, to write, share, offer advice and to lay down tracks on students' work. As a vocalist and dancer, I had a unique connection to other singers and dancers in the camp, a subset of the program's attendants which the hip-hop heavy Refresh leadership had been less able to tend to in the past. I grew in confidence as an artist and was encouraged to push myself creatively. I took new avenues with my lyrics, poetry, voice and movement practice, like performing and recording rap, and leading large groups in stage presence training. These experiences were far out of my comfort zone at the time, but little by little I grew accustomed to this growth-inspiring discomfort. Every time I was tempted to hide in the background with my artistry, the mere example of each leader and student finding and sharing their story and their sound, overcoming the fear of being seen, called me to step up.



*Students before performing at a local farmers market*

This unique and challenging summer experience emboldened me as an artist and as a leader, it revealed to me the healing, community-building power of creating art and telling stories. It also introduced me to the nuts and bolts of non-profit work, the grit, complexity and the sheer amount of work it takes to foster such life-giving opportunities, both inside and outside of the behind-the-scenes leadership. Not only do sustainable accountability systems and reservoirs of trust need to be maintained in non-profit and creative work, so do dependable funding sources, well-cultivated community and city partnerships, and a clear and replicable system and a foolproof product. This summer I encountered a fast track exposure to the grand art of administration, relationship, leadership and of creativity itself. I am forever enriched, empowered and enabled by this project. Thank you to the J. Sanford Miller Family for funding this transformative event in my creative and academic career. Thank you also, to George Sampson and Peter Bussigel for their support as UVA faculty mentors and advisors over the unfolding of this summer opportunity. Last but not least, thank you to DJ Doc Harrill and Lee Harrill, to every member of the Fresh Camp student leadership team, including KK Savage, Blue, Dee, T-Stylez,

Spooney, Pat, Nate, Los Post, Olympio, Dylan, Darius, and to my beloved homeland, Cleveland, OH.



*Students and me at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame*