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Critical Youth Media
Letter Home—Winter 2019

From the Westside, With Love:

My great-grandparents moved to Chicago from Arkansas in the 1940s and settled in the predominantly Black westside community of North Lawndale, just off Route 66 and Kostner Ave. My great-grandfather, a hard-worker and savvy businessman, owned several local businesses in North Lawndale in addition to owning two houses directly across the street from one another. When he passed in 1979 my mom was just 8-years-old, and despite having six grown adult children, he left one of his houses in her name. That is the house is where I was born and spent most of my childhood before moving to Los Angeles in 2010, and it is where I currently live with my grandma, my great-grandparents' only daughter. My ties to the westside of Chicago run *deep*, and despite the infamous reputation that the westside gets from the rest of Chicago, and that Chicago gets from the rest of the world, I make a point to represent the westside of Chicago (both) proudly and unapologetic. My affiliations to my neighborhood and my city are major driving points of my community organizing and career goals.

When I first returned to Chicago in June, my plan was to work closely with Free Spirit Media (FSM), an organization based in the Homan Square neighborhood that borders North Lawndale. Initially, I considered the irony of working on the westside with passive complacency. *Of course, I'd be working on the westside. Duh.* To me, that was a given, a natural and acceptable choice made for me by the universe. However, after my partnership with FSM fell through in September, I opened myself to branching out and exploring my collaboration options on the southside, also a historically and predominantly Black, low-income area, but twice as big as the westside and with a more visible organizing community.

As a result of branching out beyond the westside, I've partnered with the Community Film Workshop on the southside, and now the Broadway Youth Center on the northside. However, I've become reluctantly reacquainted with the anti-westside hostilities that come with attempting to work in and be a part of spaces dominated by southsiders and other Chicago communities. According to the rest of the city, the westside (or "out west") is not only perceived as generally isolated, but dirty, ghetto, dangerous, and "country." Yet, I see these glaring characteristics as indications of a historically Black community that has faced extensive structural discrimination and concentrated inequity, apparent in its rates of poverty, unemployment, crime, lack of education, and mental and physical health issues, and this is largely due to well over a century of anti-black and anti-poor policy structures created by a corrupt local government system.

Because of my understanding of where I come from and everything that is up against the westside, including the rest of Chicago's resistance to acknowledging it as a historically, culturally, and socially valid community with dynamic people who live unique experiences, I have become re-inspired to amplify and advocate for the westside even more. This desire

has only exaggerated the urgency of my long-term goal of having a permanent community workshopping space for Critical Youth Media on the westside of Chicago. While before, working on Critical Youth Media on the westside of Chicago appeared to be something that was just naturally handed to me, now it's something I see myself having to really work for, and the desire to do so is much more meaningful. I have new long-term goals to seek out genuine connections with the existing artistic and organizing communities that already exist on the westside. I am currently developing ideas for a panel and networking event featuring artists, entrepreneurs, and organizers based on the westside. I am also considering creating a mini-documentary to amplify the diverse narratives coming out of westside communities and create a dialogue about how social division is a political tactic unique to Chicago that is being perpetuated in anti-westside rhetoric by people who are just as politically oppressed on the southside.

As Chicago prepares to make history with its first Black female mayor in a runoff election this April, there is an obvious active shift in energy from both those with political power and those attempting to hold government agents accountable to their constituents. At the same time, Black people are moving out of Chicago in an exodus-like manner, and I believe it's up to those who are remaining steadfast members of their communities to come together and eradicate all lines of division, especially the division between westsiders and southsiders, mostly because it's ridiculous. *Many* southside families originated from the westside and were pushed out because of the same governmental policies that isolated and drained resources from westside communities. Despite the stigmas associated with the westside, I will continue to live and work here, while consistently calling in southsiders, northsiders, and eastsiders to join me in the rehabilitation work I plan to do in Chicago. I believe that those of us who have undeniable ties to our communities have a responsibility to hold space and advocate for all vulnerable populations in Chicago, despite what side of the city they are from, as we do the work to uplift and invest in our own neighborhoods.

What I've Been Up To:

January started with a burst of energy. After the premiere of *Surviving R. Kelly* on Lifetime, the Chicago artist and organizing community was in upheaval. On my Twitter timeline, I witnessed the aggregation of art, politics, media, culture, and trauma, and this moment of urgency called to my peers and I to organize *Come Together Chi*. This was a town-hall-type community event open to the public holding space for discussions about sexual violence education and art as unpacking trauma and guiding healing, and we welcomed over a hundred people from the Chicago artist community. I had the honor of serving as one of the mediators for the event which was well-received by my peers. Despite the organizing and facilitating work I've done during my time in Berkeley, it was the first time I served my Chicago community in such a capacity and at such a pivotal moment. I almost forgot that it was something I used to do, that I genuinely enjoy, and that I'm naturally good at. Additionally, I was selected to take a free business plan course taught by a professor from the Urban Business School and hosted at the Stony Island Arts Bank, which houses part of the Rebuild Foundation. Taking this course has reminded me to utilize my entire skillset

and inspired me to be clear about my intentions for Critical Youth Media as well as my personal brand and career as an artist and community organizer.

In February, I survived the Polar Vortex which grasped national media attention as the weather plummeted to -16° with a historic wind chill of -40° . My California friends were scared for me, but I was comfortable at home with my grandma and the heat on. I got home that Monday evening and didn't leave the house again until Friday afternoon! After the extreme weather passed, I connected with the Broadway Youth Center (BYC) through a friend who is currently interning as an in-house photography and media person. The center serves LGBTQ+ and housing insecure youth ages 16-24 on the northside of Chicago. BYC, my friend and I are currently developing a 6- to 8-week combined photography and filmmaking workshop for their semi-permanent visitors. The goal of the workshop is to create a collaborative photography project and a complementary short film to center and empower BYC participants. Unfortunately, because of the bureaucratic process of bringing me in as a long-term volunteering partner, there is a standard six-week processing period *after* my March 20th orientation date before I can actually begin the workshop. It's unfortunate, because I am more than prepared to start working right away; still, I am satisfied to know that I will be able to begin my first workshop sometime in the spring and will have time to adequately prepare. My goal is to feature the completed works on my website and social media to draw more attention to the growing potential of Critical Youth Media workshops and to establish new partnerships for the summer and following fall.

March has just begun, and I am wrapping up my business plan class at the Stony Island Arts Bank. I plan to use this business plan to contact potential donors to provide funding for future 2019-2020 workshops. I am also re-collaborating with the Community Film Workshop as we prepare to partner with the Logan Center at the University of Chicago to host a media production workshop for students 12-14 throughout the summer until September. I have the potential to come onto the project as a Program Director, representing both the Community Film Workshop and Critical Youth Media. The position would be part-time, which is perfect for me because I can plan other community organizing events and workshops throughout the summer. I am very excited because I've wanted to work with the Logan Center since I arrived in Chicago, and I have been eager to start planning my summer workshops. Although I wouldn't be working with high school students, I think middle schoolers are still wholly capable of collaborating with one another to create something dynamic and unique to their personal understanding of themselves and their communities.

As a professional development goal, I have decided to apply for USC's Rossier School of Education MA in Teaching and Credentials online program seeking my credentials in Social Studies for Secondary Education in Illinois. I am confident about my application. I would start the program in September 2019 after my Stronach Prize period is over, which is perfect timing. It's exciting to plan for new long-term goals and prepare for my next transition. I'm halfway through this year, and I marvel at how I was just starting to feel very discouraged about the progress I'd been making with my workshops. Regardless of the setbacks, it appears that things are now building steam and the consistent energy I've been putting into networking and building partnerships for my workshops is finally starting to

pay off. Even planning for life after my time with Stronach ends has me motivated to find ways to keep Critical Youth Media going past September. I'm preparing for my future, while appreciating the present, I am very excited to see how things continue to progress and the work that Critical Youth Media will be a part of in the coming months.