

East Palo Alto's Epic Undertaking

A new nonprofit arts center fills the need for creativity and community.

BY CAROLYNE ZINKO

The doors are just beginning to open at East Palo Alto's \$30 million EPACENTER Arts, the first hub for arts and culture since the city's inception in 1983, and already, it's living up to its mission as a beacon for the community.

The 25,000-square-foot complex for youth ages 6 to 25 — designed by WHY Architecture, known globally for its high-end museum work — broke ground in 2018 and was slated to open in 2020, with a goal of providing 1,500 kids a year with free classes focused on creativity and design. Pandemic-related delays stalled that plan, but with the crisis came opportunity.

As the coronavirus spurred illness and job losses in the community, and the **George Floyd** killing sparked civil unrest across the nation, EPACENTER leaders surveyed local families and asked what it could do to be relevant to their lives. "What we heard was: 'We are under a lot of stress — the amount of pressure and anxiety we're feeling is overwhelming — and we would like



CHRIS BAGLEY



Marcia and John Goldman at the groundbreaking of EPACENTER, above; at right, students and instructors make, play, dance and perform as a supported community.

help with that,” says **Nadine Rambeau**, EPACENTER’s executive director. “I couldn’t imagine being 10 years old and watching some of the images on television last year. How do we teach kids that they can survive and thrive?”

EPACENTER staff shifted gears, creating new programs that bypassed the physical building and went straight into East Palo Alto families’ homes. From last fall through spring, led by teachers and health professionals, local children began working out their feelings through dance, drawings, photography, film, animation and music over Zoom. In July of this year, EPACENTER began offering a limited number of classes on-site, in studios with garage-style roll-up doors opened to the outside. This month, the nonprofit will ramp up more classes of limited size indoors, if county health orders allow. And when the center is at full speed, teens will be able to take part in new partnerships with regional businesses, job training programs, internships and the planning of civic festivals, among other things. Census figures show the city, population 29,314, is 66 percent Latino, with a median household income of \$67,000, lagging far behind other Silicon Valley cities.

None of this would have happened without Atherton’s **Marcia and John Goldman**, the driving force behind EPACENTER at 1950 Bay Road for more than a decade. The couple’s philanthropy focuses on youth, health and the arts. Through their John & Marcia Goldman Foundation, the two spent \$3.5 million for the 3-acre site (plus additional funds for the building) and are leading a campaign to raise the nonprofit’s operating funds. Additionally, the couple encouraged the recent survey and program pivot.

From the beginning, in a bottoms-up approach, the Goldmans urged the creation of a youth advisory council that would collaborate with the architect. The result — in a city with no movie theaters, bowling alleys or skating rinks — is a center with media and technology labs, dance and music studios, a maker space, a theater and a 350-seat outdoor amphitheater. Teens picked WHY Architecture for the job in 2016, selected all materials and colors, requested

the building be designed for LEED platinum certification, and came up with EPACENTER, pronounced “epicenter,” an intentional play on the city’s name. “We didn’t ever say what we thought they needed,” notes John Goldman. “Instead, they told us what they wanted.”

EPACENTER’s hallmark is its indoor-outdoor flow, with windows that open for ventilation, studios with doors that access the outside, and a courtyard with a large roof for shade. “I didn’t think of it as a building but as a village, a hacienda,” shares WHY founder **Kulapat Yantrasast**. Materials such as Douglas fir, cedar and pine; polycarbonate plastic with translucency; glass; and rubberized shingles in multiple colors were incorporated to reflect the diversity of the community. And Hood Design Studio of Oakland installed lush natural landscaping around the building. “I’ve done this type of collaboration before but not to this level — this is a very deep engagement,” Yantrasast says of the multiyear project, part of a new trajectory of work for the firm. “The kids realized this was their opportunity to dream.”

Staci Edwards was 10 and taking private music lessons when originally consulted about EPACENTER. “I didn’t want it to be a big thing where kids from other cities would come in and take spots away from the kids in East Palo Alto,” says Edwards, now 18 and a sophomore at the



University of San Francisco. "I wanted to recognize all the faces on the campus but also meet new people."

For the past several months, friends have been made online, in places like Zoom ballet. Instructor **Cassi**

Coleman, 23, an East Palo Alto native who trained at her mother's Queens Dance Studio in Los Altos, has been teaching to Disney soundtracks on Saturday mornings, taking time to allow her six students, ages 5 to 10, to eagerly discuss the past week's activities, right down to the pancakes they ate for breakfast. **Ella Avena**, 7, who twirled in a leotard in front of the computer in her family's living room, shifted to in-person classes at EPACENTER in July. The interactions with other girls alleviate isolation, says her mother, **Alicia Gutierrez**, adding, "After her classes, she's super happy the rest of the day."

Weekly telehealth art therapy groups led by therapists **Tonia Chen** and **Emily Sullivan** of Palo Alto's Children's Health Council have given participating students ages 6 to 15 a chance to express their feelings by drawing, painting or making things with clay. "It's the process of doing it," says Chen, "that's healing for the person suffering trauma." In digital art and photography Zoom classes, **Melanie Resendiz**, 14, created a self-portrait that combined folkloric dancers on top and turbulent images below, representing what she sums up as "unhappiness, sadness and fear." Resendiz adds: "When I showed it to my teacher and she liked it, I was surprised. It felt really nice that someone could see it, and like it, and understand."

In the coming months, EPACENTER will pair teens with affordable housing developers to create a mural on a water tank visible from Highway 101; launch master classes for teens with an architect, an ecologist and a designer from a socially conscious design firm; and start planning for teen-led city festivals, among other projects.

For Rambeau, the Goldmans' approval of program expansion in the \$3 million operating budget for 2021 was inspiring, noting, "They said yes because it came from the youth and parents in the community. They said, 'If they've identified it, then Nadine, we've got to meet that need.'" **NHC**



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