



SOUTH JERSEY

# INFORMATION EQUITY PROJECT

## Camden open mic spreads 'good vibes' and supports local artists

by Charles Curtis II

During a recent event at the Parkside Learning Garden, Tanisha Marie Marie spoke into the microphone atop a stand adorned with brightly colored flowers--and instructed the audience to: "Breathe in, breathe out."

A calm settled as the crowd drew a collective breath and then exhaled in unison. Everyone was gathered on the small plot at 1220 Haddon Avenue. The Learning Garden is positioned between the well-known Donkey's Place restaurant and Top Model beauty salon. What would otherwise be an empty lot has been transformed by the non-profit Parkside Business and Community In Partnership (PBCIP) into a welcoming garden with a modest stage that Marie makes full use of her neo-soul music set.

Marie, a singer and songwriter, is also co-host of "Good Vibes" open mic series, which invites local artists to perform and showcase their works. Hosted on the last Saturday of the month between March and September, these events provide a space for Camden-based creatives -- singers, poets, rappers, and even painters-- to hone their talent and express themselves through artistry and conversation.

"I believe in supporting the youth," says Good Vibes founder Ajeena Riggs. Born and raised in New York City, Riggs is a trained vocalist and classical pianist who attended LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. Since moving to Camden 8 years ago, Riggs and her husband, Troy Riggs, have opened the Camden Store, a custom print and embroidery shop. She'd been looking for ways to engage the community through their family-owned business when she remembered one of her favorite programs growing up.

"I loved how they could have conversations about issues concerning them," Riggs says of BET Network's "Teen Summit," a talk show that ran from 1989 to 2002. She wanted to create a similar outlet for the youth of Camden. So Riggs started hosting impromptu open mics and began reaching out to local talent for help.

She soon came across Taquan Allen's social media content in 2014 and recruited the young poet and videographer to help draw artists to the open mics.

"I still needed a name for the event and asked Taquan to come up with one," says Riggs. Within a half hour, Taquan called back and pitched 'Good Vibes.' The name stuck, and in September 2016, the first official Good Vibes was held at the Camden Store.

The events are free to the public. The only requirement is that attendees sign up to reserve a seat. The format has remained the same, for the most part: a one-hour



christopher charles photo

### Good Vibes host and performer Tanisha Marie sings during her neo soul set.

open mic, followed by themed group conversation that runs about 20 minutes and a closing performance from a featured artist. Over the years, Good Vibes has welcomed community members, including vendors and guest speakers to amplify the event and showcase local businesses.

"We've invited entrepreneurs, caterers, young vegan chefs, and even [had] live painting!" says Christopher Charles Hampton, who started attending the open mics early on and now serves as director for the Good Vibes programming. Hampton also works as the executive director of Camden Renaissance Leaders, a non-profit that focuses on youth leadership, civic engagement, and freedom of expression. So, a driving factor for Hampton is: "I want to see young people in our city have a voice."

With Hampton as a partner, Riggs began taking steps to help realize the growth potential of Good Vibes: "We recognized that Good Vibes had outgrown the store, said Riggs. "In 2019, we had a conversation about impact and power. We decided to make it a program."

That year Open Vibes moved away from its impromptu shows in favor of scheduled-seasonal events. The venue also changed, with the open mic sessions moved from The Camden Store to The Learning Garden across the street. Good Vibes became a subsidiary of Camden Renaissance in 2020-- a transition that facilitates access to grants and helps fund sustainable growth. Most recently, Ocean Bank awarded the program \$4,000 to aid with operations.

Good Vibes also has funding support from local donations and the personal investment of hosts and organizers. Rutgers University, Camden City, and PBCIP (Parkside Business and Community in Partnership) have all contributed regularly to Good Vibes over the years.

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See "Good Vibes" next page

## Keystone First provides Legal Services at No Cost to offset evictions for members with disabilities

**PHILADELPHIA, PA** — Keystone First, the largest Medicaid plan in southeastern Pennsylvania, has teamed with a local non-profit to provide legal services at no cost to help Keystone First Medicaid members with disabilities or chronic health conditions mitigate the risk of eviction and address health-harming housing conditions.

The Housing Stability Initiative, a collaboration between Keystone First and the Legal Clinic for the Disabled, was formally launched last summer prior to the expiration of the national eviction moratorium in August. The Housing Stability Initiative aims to provide members with legal representation if they have a case that goes to court. It also helps those at risk of eviction apply for available rental assistance and works with landlords to remediate harmful living conditions for members who reside in substandard housing conditions.

Currently, Keystone First members who rent in Philadelphia and Delaware counties -- and whom the health plan identifies as being at risk of eviction -- are eligible. What's more, members in those counties not at risk for eviction; but who reside in poor housing conditions are also eligible. About 1 in 14 renters faces eviction annually in Philadelphia, one of the poorest big cities in America.

Kathleen Mullin, who leads housing initiatives for Keystone First, said eviction can be a traumatic event for vulnerable households, especially as millions of families are still recovering from the pandemic's economic fallout.

"For Medicaid managed care organizations, these medical-legal partnerships can have a positive impact on health outcomes by helping to stabilize housing for those living in poverty," she said. "We can integrate legal services with care management support to stave off the harmful effects caused by sub-standard housing conditions and evictions."

Keystone First care managers, or other member-facing staff, can refer eligible Keystone First Medicaid members to the program if engagement with that member determines their housing situation meets program criteria, including lead paint or lead pipes, pest infestation, or leaky roofs.

Theresa Brabson, legal director for the Legal Clinic for the Disabled, said the COVID-19 pandemic has placed a spotlight on the nation's affordable housing crisis and increased housing insecurity for low-income renters, who have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

"It is critical that we recognize and address housing insecurity as a social determinant of health. For renters who have significant chronic health conditions or a disability, housing instability poses a risk to their physical and mental health," she said. "Through this innovative, interdisciplinary partnership, we are better able to identify tenants in need of legal assistance and provide an immediate, community-based access point for justice."

When eviction cannot be avoided, Brabson said her organization negotiates with the landlords on the tenant's behalf to reach a settlement.

"Keeping people in a stable home is a good strategy to keep them out of hospital emergency rooms, shelters, and to promote better overall health outcomes," Brabson said.

### About Keystone First

Keystone First is a Medical Assistance (Medicaid) managed care health product offered by Vista Health Plan, Inc., an affiliate of Independence Blue Cross, in five southeastern Pennsylvania counties. Here at Keystone First, we are mission-driven and dedicated to helping members get care, stay well and build healthy communities. For more information, visit [www.keystonefirstpa.com](http://www.keystonefirstpa.com).

Independence Blue Cross and Vista Health Plan, Inc. are independent licensees of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

### About The Legal Clinic for the Disabled (LCD)

The Legal Clinic for the Disabled (LCD) provides free civil legal services to low-income people with disabilities and to the deaf and hard of hearing in Philadelphia, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery Counties. LCD's mission is to promote inclusion, independence, and justice by providing free, quality legal representation to overcome legal obstacles that would otherwise affect an individual's independence, health, or quality of life. Since 1987, LCD, a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation, has helped thousands of Pennsylvanians with disabilities.

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## Good Vibes

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has performed under the stage name "Drey Viloria" since 2016, credits the program with his growth as an artist. "Good Vibes has been consistent and always following up. It gave me that platform to sharpen my skills and public speaking," he said.

"I was supporting them before I was doing music myself," says videographer Khalif Holmes.

Seeing people that you wouldn't expect [to] perform motivated me to perform," says Holmes.



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Good Vibes has also created spaces for artists' growth beyond their open mic sessions by hosting workshops that look to educate and empower the artist. "We have workshops which teach artists how to protect their music, creating LLCs around their work. We educate them about their talent and how to take it to the next level," says Riggs.

While the open mic has remained consistent over the years, it has adapted to embrace more community voices and tackle more difficult but relevant themes. "We have had some challenges like including suicide in the conversation," says Riggs. So, "We make sure that there are resources and a professional available."

With its artist workshops and support for collaborative projects, Good Vibes has evolved to not only host open mics but also connect local creatives with training and resources to support their talents. For some, it's an investment that also inspires service.

"Good Vibes made me into the artist I am today. It took me out of my comfort zone," says Allen. "It developed my sense of character because this is how I give back to the city."

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