

# RYSE Youth Center Origin Story

**RYSE**  
CENTER



# INTRODUCTION

In a small corner of the RYSE Youth Center, there's a room that no one visits: Not the hundreds of kids who pour in and out of the Center, not the trauma specialists who visit youth bedside in hospital rooms when something goes horribly wrong in their lives, not even the founders whose connections to the space are among the most intense. It's a room that stays empty. This is how it should be.

In other words, when RYSE's virtual network is functioning at its finest, this room is best left locked and forgotten. It's the room that houses the Center's digital server, and if the RYSE server is functioning at maximum efficiency - in other words, if the server is in fact serving the Center as it should - we can forget that this room exists. Nothing broken, nothing to fix. No maintenance, no risk.

It's the only room at the Center that can boast such a privilege.

When you step into RYSE, you sense immediately how every other room is hyper-frequented daily and by various staff members in sequence. A young woman sits in the recording studio staring at her notebook in silence. There is no calm hum here but the chest-pumping shake of kick drums and keyboard stabs.

Down the hall in the kitchen, youth play microwave roulette, heating up soup as they cross the after-school bridge between lunch and dinner, or finally have their first and/or only meal of the day. They discuss slut-shaming, a young feminist conversation for which they develop language on the spot.

On the other side of the building in the education room, students crowd around a table for multi-subject tutoring, debating the hierarchy of YouTube dance video preferences between readings of the Periodic Table.

Down the hall in the group room, the on-site therapist rises between sessions to cover a shift at the front desk. Everywhere youth press for attention silently and in chorus. Every day. Always.

After eight years on the landscape of Richmond, RYSE is a place where integral parts of a hurting and glorious city come to shed conflict so that they may seek and create solutions. Here, youth and adult staff alike go from room to room doing the work of circuit breakers—adjusting emotional wattages, wiring conduits of psychic current, a network of servers tending to the flow of a short-circuited, short-changed generation moving from crisis to the quiet hum of a working community.

It wasn't always this way. In the early 2000s, the youth of Richmond were in a predicament. Before RYSE, back when the city—in particular this generation of young people—was suffering through what seemed to be a persistent stream of homicides, back in that beginning, before an engaged youth voice was chiseled into civic life, before anyone set forth to rethink young people's place in the city, before all of that, there in the open corners of Richmond were its youth. They wanted safety, and they insisted on being heard.

In those days, Kimberly Aceves' work in Richmond was as Executive Director of Youth Together, an intellectual clearinghouse of youth activism emanating out from the heart of Oakland. As violence peaked in Richmond, Kimberly wasn't the only person taking note. The youth were moving.

"Young people," recalls Kimberly, "organized and designed a youth-led assessment and eventually organized the campaign to lift up what their priority needs were."

As an effort born out of Youth Together, young people talked to over 1,500 of their peers about what they needed to feel safe. During this time, there were very few services or safe spaces for young people, and the larger funding field was not investing in Richmond.

"We were working in this context to change and move a city not friendly for or to young people," Aceves says.

In support of youth organizers, Kimberly, along with co-founder Kanwarpal Dhaliwal and adult allies like County Supervisor John Gioia, began working to address the emotional, mental, and political health of local youth in site-specific, innovative ways.

# ONE

Take a city as complicated as Richmond, with big industry looming on its edge for decades, a city with waves of migration, the ebb and flow of economic and political stability and general invisibility in the shadow of better-known neighboring cities. Richmond, California, is a mid-size city where some of 21st century America's most definitive social moments transpire: the country's highest HIV rates, one of the first and biggest court cases against police-related killings, the proximity of global industry, and the ecological risk of its intersection with waterways, transit paths, and people whose health is a constant concern in the balance.

**Take this city and imagine where youth might fit.** A Green mayor is elected, but adults run amok in city council spewing bigotry, homophobia, and hate. Precedent is set by adopting a "health-in-all-policies" general plan, but in the great mix of civics and money, major questions remain unasked, questions like, What can be done to keep youth safe and thriving?



# TWO

A student at Richmond High in 2003, Greg Ollano was one of the 1,500 kids that participated in the youth-led needs assessment.

“We didn’t really have anything to do beyond PAL,” remembers Greg, referring to Richmond’s Police Activity League, a city program that offers mentoring, social, and athletic services that are often led by police officers.

“But we didn’t want anything to do with the police. So when organizing was happening in the schools with Youth Together, it was like: Where’s the big movement in Richmond?”

Greg soon became an ally of the project, which was laying groundwork for what would become the RYSE Center years later. But in the project’s initial steps, youth were galvanized in particular by the murders of four Richmond youth.

“They were wanting change—like, I’m tired of this!” recalls Greg of youth attitudes at the time. “The Black community here in Richmond, the Southeast Asian community—doesn’t have a voice. In a sense, we helped create that voice for everyone.”

Though Greg would go on to become RYSE Center’s first Leadership Organizer, he says he didn’t think of what RYSE could be in the future.

“I didn’t think of the big stuff RYSE is doing now, it was just, ‘Alright, how are we gonna get young folks organized and what are we gonna change?’”

It's a clear day, and Kanwarpal Dhaliwal is seated in la Casita, a small addition that marks the continued growth of the RYSE Center. By now, the Center is a sort of national model for youth civic engagement. A co-founder who also previously served as the Executive Co-Director of RYSE, Kanwarpal is now the Center's Director of Community Health and Integrative Practice. She recalls how that data collected by the youth assessment gave adult advocates what they needed to go out and start talking to stakeholders.

"For almost two years it was going to city council and other organizations to tell them, 'This is what young people need.' Through the beginning it was a healthy struggle to create sustained partnership," she says.

"We needed a space to decompress, to feel safe," remembers Kanwarpal, "but also to be in community with each other, to build relationships, to change the reasons why young people were being shot and why we feel it's okay to hurt each other."

Together, Kimberly and Kanwarpal brought Sara Kershner onto their team. A long-time organizer and activist, Sara had led the planning for Youth Uprising and would end up helping identify what was needed to move the nascent project through its initial stages.

"It's not an accident how we got here," says Kimberly. "There needed to be youth-led spaces in the community, where they could have real culture. We shopped that idea around to the school district and to local officials. That was 2004."

Late in 2005, Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia learned about the project's youth assessment through his wife and contacted Kimberly about finding a building, a physical space that was the assessment's major outcome.

Terrance Cheung, Chief of Staff at the time to Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, remembers the survey.

“The biggest thing that young people wanted in the community was to have a safe space that they could call their own,” he recalls. “That kind of always was in the back of Supervisor Gioia's mind and when the current site became available we grabbed it right away and set that aside to be that safe space for young people.”

When Supervisor Gioia called to tell Kimberly he had secured a building, the natural arc of reaction was first, “We’re getting nearly all of what we said our young people want – a space outside of school,” says Kimberly.

What followed was also the realization that a space alone wasn’t enough. Young people also wanted it to feel like theirs, that it was safe and welcoming for everyone.

“Now that we had brick and mortar, we also had to build the culture,” Aceves said.

During the initial planning for the RYSE Center, there were “very few services, very few providers.”

“Funders weren’t really interested in Richmond,” says Kimberly. “The politics weren’t so progressive.”

With little support available, nonprofits were in survival mode, which complicated their essential needs to collaborate, to be creative, and to innovate. All of this became a focus for the early RYSE team.

Kanwarpal recalls, “Youth Together kept us at pace with where young people were. We were intentional to do this in a way that honored the legacy of the young people that brought us here; young people needed to be at the front the whole way through.”

“Youth organizing as a concept was still a radical concept; many stakeholders and gatekeepers were not ready,” says Kimberly, “Lifting up young people as leaders and experts was met with a lot of pushback.”

Recognizing a local triad of police aggression, neighborhood conflict, and limited educational options, the team pushed onward to manifest principles of peace, unity, and justice in a safe space.

# THREE

In his office on a busy stretch of San Pablo Avenue, between mom and pop restaurants and across the street from day workers hoping to catch an afternoon's small handful of cash, County Supervisor John Gioia is taking meetings in his office. In the midst of the violence of the early 2000s, Supervisor Gioia wanted to do something to help the city move forward. What could he do, he wondered, to keep youth safe, to help the city reach a new potential? To whom could he turn for guidance?

In his search for a focus on youth issues in the area, he met with Kimberly and Kanwarpal. Having just been part of a similar effort to turn a vacant county building in East Oakland into a youth center, Kanwarpal and Kimberly felt like they could offer the framework and the commitment to another youth-led design process.

Together they called upon a handful of key players. Local Richmond organizer and activist Andres Soto would sit on a committee. And eventually key early investors like Lisa Villarreal, a youth crisis interventionist turned program manager with The San Francisco Foundation, would visit to keep abreast of the process, later providing wholehearted investment for development. For Gioia it was a bit of learning process. He had the political network and knew how to find funding from interested stakeholders, but he experienced a learning curve. From his seat, he took notes from Youth Together about the process, the planning, and the patience necessary for creating a viable, long-lasting model for impact that puts young people at the Center.

"It took me some learning as well to understand 'let's not open it up fast,'" says Gioia, "'Let's invest in this process to build more support and understanding of what this Center would be with young people dictating with adult allies.'"

"Those were the formidable growing pains," recalls Terrance Cheung, "I don't know if we ever thought that we weren't going to have a Center; it was more about when were we going to have it. Is it going to be next year, versus the next three or four years?"



# FOUR

An empty parking lot. An industrial paper shredding plant casting its shadow against the railroad tracks. Where before there was nothing, how did this space suddenly exist? Who breathed life into this abandoned county building when there was no heat, no décor, just the shell of a discarded office space with very little light and absolutely no life?

After Supervisor Gioia contacted Kimberly, the work began. They brought everyone into the space—the Steering Committee, the youth council, the program committee, Supervisor Gioia’s office staff—and assessed the potential. Yes, they would need heat, they would need architectural updates, they would need working bathrooms and paint, but it could be done. And they would do it.

Together they began to raise money and awareness. The founders—youth and adults together—worked to carve out programming, a skeleton staff, and enough steam with which to launch something that hadn’t ever existed: a free, progressively independent safe house for youth liberation.

Connor Fu grew up in East Contra Costa County. Familiar with Richmond from the periphery as a sort of “dangling participle,” he initially turned down the opportunity to work as part of the RYSE founding team.

“I had left Youth Together and said I was never gonna work for a nonprofit again,” he recalls. “So being approached by Kimberly I definitely was like, “No. Thank you, but no.”

Despite his unfamiliarity with the city and perhaps as testimony to the power of community, Connor changed his mind.

“Thinking about it more, to work with Kimberly again and the idea of seeing an idea actually become tangible—that was really exciting. It was a privilege to be asked to be a part of this. I don't know that I will ever have an opportunity to build something from the ground up, really concretize the ideas and hopes of young people.” Connor became the RYSE Operations Director and stayed for seven years.

“Going into the first phase of opening once it was actually open,” says Connor, “we had one actual program and there were new people coming in every day, every month. It's still happening. There's an average of 30 to 50 new members per month, and it's been consistent for seven years.”

An original member of RYSE, Kris Mejia arrived to the Center in its opening days.

“I was probably around 17 [years-old],” he recalls. “I went to school and then after school I'd come straight over here to organize. We didn't even have furniture in the building. We were organizing on the floor. Little by little every day it just progressed. I felt like a very powerful individual because if we needed to protest we'd make it happen, we'd turn out folks. I still feel like a powerful individual. This is a place where you hear about issues in the community. This is where you get informed. Coming here is an actual way to be involved. I knew the effect it was gonna have on the city was gonna be positive.”

Early investors were also quick to recognize the potential of a youth-centered space in Richmond. Diane Aranda, a Program Manager for The California Endowment, was responsible for implementing their “Building Healthy Communities” strategy in Richmond.

“We are clear,” says Diane of the Endowment’s mission. “We're trying to build communities, both leadership and community power, to address the conditions, politically, economically, and otherwise, that impact health. Young people are a critical part of that.”

“In terms of investors in youth leadership and youth organizing, we're probably one of the biggest investors in California, if not the country. We rely on RYSE in particular because of their approach in investing in the leadership of young people to drive change. It's very consistent with how we see that change happens,” says Diane.

Nahid Ebrahimi is part of that change. Over the span of seven years Nahid moved from attending RYSE's front desk to office assistant, Leadership Team organizer, Community Health associate coordinator, and then Coordinator of Community Health.

Along the way, she recalls, "One of my biggest charges was really to bring youth voice into conversations. The separation of young people from meaningful conversations was really notable."

The idea that young people should be at the table in conversations about the city is a sentiment reiterated by youth who were present when the Center opened its doors, youth who began to slowly but steadily impact civic decisions.

"Nowhere else did we have a say in how things are set up and how things are gonna be run. I needed that," says Angie Godinez. "After school I wasn't allowed to go anywhere else but home. My youth center, Familias Unidas, closed when I was like 16. So the director saw I was really distraught. She heard about RYSE and she said, 'You should be one of the youth that start it.' I looked into it and I submitted my application and was there at the beginning."

An original member of RYSE, Angie is studying for a PhD these days, but what she needed as a youth, she recalls, was "somewhere outside of the house where I could do my homework and have fun and grow."

Going on to graduate high school with RYSE as a base, Angie still considers the Center a second home.

"I didn't physically stay," says Angie, who serves on the Center's board. "This is a space that every time I get a chance I come and I say hi. Every single time I come it's evolving, and I want to be a part of it; I want to see a change. So in that sense I also want to give back because I know that serving on the board is also important. They need that."

Early youth leaders like Angie and founding counterparts like Kimberly, Kanwarpal, and Sara knew that shifting the culture of the place depended largely on equipping new generations to take up advocacy and action as young adults eventually transitioned out. What many didn't expect was that the youth would be ready so quickly.

Cecilia Terrazas graduated from a master's program and was looking for a job.

"When I came here I saw a variety of wrap services, also a community service school model; I was definitely inspired by that," remembers Cecilia, "but the thing that really got me to stay was going to the interview."

Cecilia, like an early majority of RYSE hires, was interviewed by the Center's youth.

"I was really inspired by that," says Cecilia. "They were hardcore, looking at my cover letter like, 'You talk a lot about resilience. What does that mean to you?' I was like, oh my god, I felt inspired that these young people felt so empowered to kind of – they're gonna decide whether I get this job or not, whether I'm a good fit? This is the kind of organization I want to be a part of."

Like Cecilia, Dan Reilly, RYSE's current Director of Innovation, was struck by the Center's culture in its earliest days. Working for a community partner, Dan created narrative video work for organizations seeking to tell their stories. One day, his work partnered him with RYSE.

"In the process," says Dan, "I got really hooked. RYSE is larger than any individual. Every victory, every award, every recognition received really feels like a collective award. Everything feels shared."

As a resident video and media mentor, one of Dan's earliest trainees was Gemikia Henderson. Arriving at the Center on a requisite internship in order to graduate high school, Gemikia's life had been destabilized by the loss of close peers and a neighborhood in perpetual turmoil.

“When I came into RYSE I didn't really know what I was getting myself into,” says Gemikia. “I didn't know nobody and it was a little uncomfortable. I was placed here; I didn't have a choice. And also in that moment a lot of killings was happening with my generation. My best friend got killed.”

Looking for the path of least engagement, Gemikia chose to take a video workshop.

“So when I was placed in the Media, Arts and Culture department I met with Dan and he was like, ‘Oh, you wanna do music or video?’ and I was like I'd rather do video 'cause that's like pushing a button. I didn't know video came with all that other stuff, editing and organizing. So Dan and Kimberly helped me shift that story to video.”

“Telling my story through video and then helping other young people do that is a form of healing. That's what kind of made me stay for, what—I've been here almost 5 years? It gave me a greater sense of community. There's no other space like this,” says Gemikia.

In the six years since her internship, Gemikia graduated high school and continues to build a body of work as a dialogue against racial profiling and state-sponsored violence, calling into question the ethical missteps and pitfalls of adult institutions that swallow youth like her and her peers. And she's not alone. In and of itself, the realization of community is key to the RYSE experience.

RYSE Youth Justice Coordinator Maaika Marshall transitioned from role to role, developing as a young adult through stages of employment at the Center.

“RYSE kind of fired me at first and I came back in a more solidified role, not as an intern,” says Maaika. “As a member you see enough and it's just like, oh, this is cool, this is awesome, they care. Cool. Then as a staff member you realize how much care and love goes into this space and how folks have to be committed to this work. I think what kept me coming back is being able to give back to young people what RYSE gave to me at 16 and 17. Whenever we came to RYSE it was like ‘I see you and I care about you and if you need me, I got you.’”

That young adults ultimately politicize themselves in self-directed ways with the help of friends, staff, and community is also among one of the Center's highest-sung praises according to Maaika.

"The knowledge and the growth that we got," she says, "I didn't know anything about social justice before coming to RYSE and now I feel like it's such a huge part of my life. I can't make a decision without thinking about the social impact. It gives you that lens and awareness."

"I think about the kids that come in now and how this is their point of knowledge," says Maaika. "As many police-involved shootings have happened in the world and as many incidents of injustice, most of these kids don't know about it. I walked in the kitchen and I asked them like, 'Oh, have you guys heard about what's happening in Ferguson?' And they looked at me like, 'Where's that? Is that in Oakland?' I'm like, 'Do you know who Mike Brown is?' They're like, 'No.' So that's where we have that conversation and they walked out of the kitchen with a new piece of knowledge. Those moments are untouchable."



# FIVE

Through her position as The San Francisco Foundation's Program Officer for Education, Lisa Villarreal was another of RYSE's early investors. After 10 years as a crisis intervention specialist in the San Francisco high school system, Lisa was familiar with the geography of trauma that youth of color are often made to navigate. When Supervisor Gioia invited her to sit in on the Center's planning committee meetings, Lisa was impressed early on.

"We had a history with Kimberly when she was with Youth Together, she really understood youth organizing and how to listen to young people," says Lisa. "She understood how to teach them first that they had a voice, second, how to use it, and third, when and where to use it and when to just sit and listen. That's so hard for kids to learn because sometimes they get slapped down so hard that they don't want to try any activism anymore because it backfires, it blows up."

For investors like The California Endowment and The San Francisco Foundation, whose portfolios span a diverse range of organizations on the ground, RYSE hit a mark early on for innovation that wielded impact. Key to that is the Center's insistence on more than listening to youth, but helping them achieve systemic change on their behalf.

"RYSE is making a difference," says Lisa Villarreal. "The work is authentic and seriously youth-led. RYSE takes risks. I would say often it's on the edge, on the cutting edge of breakthrough actions."

"The way we did it was what allowed the space for many people to feel like they own it," says Kimberly, reflecting on the foundation laid at the Center's beginning. "And that's the beautiful part."

Providing instant ownership of the Center to youth secures their lifelong investment, not in the Center per se, but in the youth themselves as they outgrow it. It's a deep investment needed from adults and advocates who are the most effective allies when they make a personal attachment to what's at stake for their own families and the city they share. Creating that sense of direct investment and care, however, is complicated. It seems to happen most by presenting a humble staff who keep their noses to the grindstone as a rule, who in service of greater youth visibility, distance themselves from the spotlight time and again.

During an event in solidarity with the protests over the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, RYSE staff line the street side by side with members, community members, and elected officials.

The day prior, Kimberly and Kanwarpal reached out to the mayor's office and the Chief of Police to share with them the fact that RYSE youth had organized a peaceful event. It wasn't a call for advice, not even an invitation, but a courtesy along the lines of, "Our youth and the adults who love them are making a statement in public, in solidarity with Black men, women, and children who have been gunned down by police in this country, in this year." It was a sort of just-so-you-know call built on respect and mutual care for the city they have in common.

When RYSE administrators were told by the mayor's office that the event wasn't a good idea, when the mayor said it would require a police presence that would distract from other concerns in the city, his lack of understanding and trust mattered only as a side note. The event went on as planned, and, as anticipated, it remained not just peaceful, but inclusive of the surrounding community. The mayor, despite his original lack of support, attended with a smile. The Chief of Police stood on the protest line and was given a Black Lives Matters sign by a RYSE employee.

The image soon went national. For many, the photo of a uniformed white male police chief sympathizing with Black Lives was somewhat of a shock. For early investors in RYSE, it was obvious that, although absent in media coverage of the viral photo, RYSE youth were central to the image. This truth reinforced exactly how powerful and relevant youth participation in Richmond could be to the ongoing national dialogue about equity and safety.



# SIX

Kimberly and Kanwarpal have been in Richmond for a decade now, cultivating the kind of culture that allows kids to thrive. They haven't sought approval, validation, or cooperation at the cost of compromise, but they have worked for progress and solidarity. They've taken the youth experience as their guide at each step, no matter what hardship had to be traversed.

If the youth are in pain, the work must be done to heal. It takes a city to keep them safe, to look out for their health, and to shift radically to protect them once they reach the Center's exit age at 24 years old. From where does this interest in youth stem? What does it take for an adult to realize that protecting and equipping our youth is the surest way to prepare a better future for all?

Kanwarpal sits in meetings even when it's hard to imagine fruitful dialogue. In those meetings, where conversation feels thick and needs constant redirection toward youth impact and cultivating well-being for Richmond's next generation, in moments when dialogue feels the most challenging, Kanwarpal remembers who she is working for.

Kimberly understands why. "When I'm losing resolve," she says, "I always think of the original young people; they showed so much tenacity and vision."

Many young people who were assessed were about to graduate. Yet, they were willing to do something that they knew they would never have access to. It had nothing to do with getting their names out there; they wanted a legacy for young people, and they wanted a better Richmond. They wanted a space, but more importantly what they wanted was to make change.

It takes a team. To build the Center from the ground up and to sow seeds toward sustainability, it took the team, the city, a small squad of investors, and a staff dedicated to seeing out a vision developed and set by young people. It takes a process over years of risk taking trial, error, and success.

# SEVEN

In the large multipurpose classroom, Kanwarpal talks about community health, trauma, and healing. Three years earlier, she launched a campaign to listen to youth directly about how violence affects their lives. On this morning, opposite a table of coffee and pastries, Kanwarpal is sharing what youth have shared with her. Fifty or so people from around Richmond and surrounding cities who work directly and indirectly in youth services have gathered to listen.

At the front of the room, Kanwarpal stays out of the attendees' line of vision. Onscreen graphics help explain what she has learned in surveying Richmond youth for the past five years. Some of what she shares is that there is little way for Richmond youth to cope with the sequences of tragic events in their lives: no therapists, no counseling, no trauma-informed care. Rather, what are available on a constant and convenient basis are drugs and trouble. According to one youth surveyed, it's easier to buy a bag of weed than it is to talk to an adult.

As full as the room may be with service providers and individuals interested in changing their community for the better, Kanwarpal's make-it-plain language and the light-as-day revelations keep attendees riveted with information they can't otherwise access despite their genuine interest.



# EIGHT

After eight years on the landscape of Richmond, RYSE is a place where integral parts of a broken and glorious city come to shed conflict so that they may seek and create solutions. Here, youth and adult staff alike go from room to room doing the work of circuit breakers--adjusting emotional wattages, wiring conduits of psychic current, like a network of servers tending to the flow of a short-circuited, short-changed generation moving from crisis to the quiet, peaceful hum of a working community.

As the crow flies, from the height of the nearest cloud, the RYSE Center must resemble some quiet corner of immense urban sprawl, like a network server humming quietly along, working at maximum capacity, in relative harmony.



# CHANGE STARTS HERE



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**CONTACT RYSE TO  
GET INVOLVED**

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