

COSACOSA art at large, Inc.

# Site & Sound

*Visions & Voices from North Philadelphia*



a model program for

*Youth Visions for Stronger Neighborhoods*  
an initiative of National Learn & Serve America with CTCnet

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*Site & Sound* was a model program developing strategies for *Youth Visions for Stronger Neighborhoods*, an initiative of National Learn & Serve America with CTCnet.



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## The Art of the Word by Ed Shockley

“The right word, in the right ear, at the right time, can change the world.”

-Edgar Joseph Shockley Jr., the essayist's father

I learned *nommo*, the magic of words, growing up in Philadelphia among family and friends who had migrated from the South. Stories were everywhere. The Jack O'Lantern misled wayward travelers into the Yorktown swamps. The first Negro trolley drivers had to ride accompanied by armed National Guardsmen or risk being pulled from their seats. “You keep twisting your face up like that, and the wind is gonna change it; then you gonna be stuck like that forever.”

Tales of transformation were whispered, shouted, and sung incessantly. These narratives weren't the famous stories in my textbooks or from Sunday school class. They were far more compelling. They were irrefutable sagas told in first person by people whose raw truthfulness was undeniable.

My father shared the tale of a fateful day in solitary confinement. He had grown up in poverty beyond my imagining -- from migrant farming to warring with zip guns and rubber hoses stuffed with sand, and then finally to robbing drugstores. He was a powerful man, the gang leader, and in prison ran a protections racket. If you couldn't fight, then pay Eddie in cigarettes, and he'd keep you alive.

The problem was, as the story goes, there was the “dead time.” When a prisoner was in solitary confinement, those long days were not commuted from his sentence. A disagreeable fellow could enter prison for a year, yet emerge as a geriatric patient. My father was on this path. One day, after serving nearly five years for a two-year sentence, the small aperture on the solitary cellblock door opened. A voice said simply, “Young man, if you don't change your ways you will be in here for the rest of your life.”

It was the right word. It was the right day. It was the right weary ear. My father became a model inmate before emerging from prison to integrate the plumbing unions in New Jersey and Massachusetts. He sponsored hundreds of others to take trade union tests and diversify the construction industry.

This is art: the word, the story, the creative action. Art is a mirror held up to life, and in that reflection, we meet ourselves. Today, the transformative power of the word is extended through accessible new media technologies. COSACOSA's *Site & Sound* project demonstrates the power of digital storytelling. The combined work of individual speakers and singers, writing and recording both together and independently from each other, generates a collective palette of anguish and hope. The subtext is simple: the impact of attitude upon success.

The great lesson served across my childhood dinner table was this power of perception. The stories of my family were always

ones of triumph. Grandpop escaped the sinking merchant sea vessel and returned to the London pub where his Jamaican friends mistook him for a ghost. Grandmom endured abuse and indignities, then won employment at the clothing factory and sent two children to college by tirelessly

stitching sleeves on men's coats.

The poems, songs, skits, speeches and interviews immortalized in *Site & Sound's Visions & Voices* media projects all scream the same message of possibility. Whether revealing the vibrant industrial community that once thrived here or a vacant lot juxtaposed against an urban garden, they challenge us each to ask, “What life will I build for myself?” This question can transform a victim into a hero, overcoming obstacles to achieve greatness.

West Africans have celebrated *nommo*, the transformative power of words, since time immemorial. It is found in the stories they labored so insistently to preserve, like Breer Rabbit and the trickster spider, despite the challenges of their early interment here in America. Today, the citizens of Philadelphia's Nicetown-Tioga community, led by the youth who are the neighborhood's future, continue this essential tradition.

Ed Shockley is the award-winning author of *Notes from a Practicing Writer* (Hopewell Publications) and nearly one hundred plays. He is a resident of Nicetown-Tioga.

“Belief creates reality. Determination is the key.”

-Voices of Community CD

“Out of life, you get what you expect.”

-Visions of Community film

Abandoned and renewed: side by side houses in Nicetown-Tioga.

## About the Project

COSACOSA's *Site & Sound* project engaged young people in North Philadelphia's Nicetown-Tioga neighborhood as leaders working for the good of their community. Collaborating with our resident artists, young people brought together inter-generational and intercultural groups of community members to uncover and understand neighborhood needs and assets.

Through community storytelling, new media workshops, and archival research, the teens led neighborhood residents in mapping their environment: the historical, physical, social, cultural, and even spiritual attributes of the neighborhood. Throughout the process, participants learned to pool their experiences, knowledge, and resources across generational and cultural lines -- creating a community better equipped to address its own needs.

Two media projects resulted from *Site & Sound*. *Visions of Community* is a thirty minute film by participating youth, exploring the history of and possible futures for Nicetown-Tioga through community interviews, original poetry, and theatrical vignettes. *Voices of Community*, a full length CD of songs and poetry, was written and performed by our youth and community musicians as a companion piece to the film.

*Visions* and *Voices* explore issues and ideas found not only in Philadelphia's Nicetown-Tioga neighborhood, but in changing urban landscapes across the country. These media projects highlight how collaborative art-making can build social capital and a sense of community self-determination -- and how youth-driven initiatives are essential to creating lasting, positive change in our neighborhoods.



Renewal past and present, part of the *Visions of Community* film, from a youth-created website: [www.cosacosa.org/MemoryMine.html](http://www.cosacosa.org/MemoryMine.html)

## About Youth Visions

COSACOSA developed *Site & Sound* as a model program for Youth Visions for Stronger Neighborhoods, an initiative of National Learn & Serve America with CTC-net. COSACOSA was the only organization nationwide asked to lead the pilot program for two years. Forming a cohort with other organizations around the country, we engaged young people in addressing community needs through multimedia technology education.

COSACOSA youth, artists, and staff met regularly online and via conference calls with diverse participants from across the nation -- from the children of migrant workers in California to the children of coal miners in Appalachia, from young Asian Pacific islanders in the urban Midwest to African American youth on the rural Mississippi Delta. Together we developed collaborative

project activities and evaluation tools. The final curriculum is designed to offer community technology programs a framework for using multimedia tools and training to engage youth in community decision-making. Using the curriculum, youth across the country can identify the most pressing problems in their neighborhoods and work towards creating awareness of and solutions to these issues.

Young people involved in the Youth Visions initiative make tangible gains in their problem-solving capabilities and leadership skills, and in understanding their sense of personal place and power. Most importantly, they discover they can make a difference in the world -- by creating stronger neighborhoods for themselves, for their fellow citizens, and for a new generation of leaders yet to come.



Children past and present, part of the *Visions of Community* film, from a youth-created website: [www.cosacosa.org/MemoryMine.html](http://www.cosacosa.org/MemoryMine.html)

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*Visions*  
of Community  
a youth-led film project

*Site*  
&  
Sound

*Voices*  
of Community  
a community-based song & poetry project

*Youth Visions for Stronger Neighborhoods*

# Visions of Community

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: When I look at my community...  
*neighborhood interviews*

Chapter 3: A Neighborhood History  
*archival images & stories*

Chapter 4: Community Sale  
*a theatrical vignette on an ideal neighborhood*

Chapter 5: The Key (part i)  
*poetry & street scenes*

Chapter 6: What this community needs  
the most is...  
*neighborhood interviews*

Chapter 7: Peace-Making is Breaking News  
*a theatrical vignette on conflict resolution*

Chapter 8: Community planning should  
focus on...  
*neighborhood interviews*

Chapter 9: The Key (part ii)  
*poetry & street scenes*

Chapter 10: Neighborhood Transformation  
*a theatrical vignette on community planning*

Chapter 11: Young people can really help this  
community by...  
*neighborhood interviews*

Chapter 12: When I look at the future...  
*neighborhood interviews*

“Poverty of mind  
is keeping you behind.  
If you can’t imagine,  
you can’t see  
the possibility  
of what you’ll find.”

-Visions & Voices of Community: The Key

Images from the *Visions of Community* film (from top):  
Burpee Seeds was located in Nicetown-Tioga for many years;  
Midvale Steel provided plentiful jobs to the neighborhood mid-century;  
scenes from *Community Sale*, *Peacemaking is Breaking News*, and  
*Neighborhood Transformation* theatrical vignettes.



# Voices of Community

Track 1: **The Key** (1:23)  
poem by Kimberly Niemela  
performance by Rol-X

Track 2: **Ghetto Blues** (3:36)  
lyrics & music by Ezechial Thurman  
vocals by Valerie Chadwick

Track 3: **Get It Together** (4:08)  
story by Lawrencette Reed  
rap by Kayon Miller & Calvin Sutton  
music by Ezechial Thurman

Track 4: **It's Not Enough** (3:24)  
lyrics & recitation by Alicia McGougan  
music & performance by Ezechial Thurman  
vocals by Ivan Draper  
percussion by Matthew Cook

Track 5: **Fatherless** (2:59)  
lyrics & rap by Michael Smoke  
music by Ezechial Thurman  
vocals by Valerie Chadwick

Track 6: **Will There Ever Be Peace** (5:19)  
lyrics & rap by Rol-X  
music by Ezechial Thurman  
vocals by Joseph Elam

Track 7: **Motherless Child** (4:27)  
traditional, music arranged by Ezechial Thurman  
vocals by Eric Westbrook

Track 8: **Hope for My Future** (2:51)  
recitation by Mrs. Neely  
lyrics & vocals by Kenderton School kindergartners  
music by Ezechial Thurman

Track 9: **Nicetown** (1:33)  
lyrics & vocals by Kenderton School students  
music by Ezechial Thurman

Track 10: **Arise** (4:00)  
music & piano performance by Ezechial Thurman  
with Steven Sampson on trombone, Troy Berry on  
bass, and Eric Westbrook on drums

Track 11: **We Gotta Grow** (2:02)  
rap by Kayon Miller & Calvin Sutton  
music by Ezechial Thurman  
vocals by Kenderton School students

Track 12: **I Wish I Knew How** (2:20)  
traditional, arranged /directed by Theodore Thomas  
vocals by the Gratz High School Choir

Images from the project (from top):  
COSACOSA youth practice interview and camera techniques;  
filming in Nicetown-Tioga; community houses, both well-kept and  
abandoned, with a mural of Reverend Leon Sullivan;  
town meetings with the Nicetown-Tioga Improvement Team;  
community Youth Speak Out.



**COSACOSA Youth Council/  
Project Leaders**

Xavier Ghaskin  
Adea Johnson  
Sharnae Mask  
Victor McBeth  
Alicia McGougan  
Marc Riley  
Miriam Tucker  
Michael Williams

**Youth Participants**

Dh'Shane Anderson  
John Anderson  
Briana Armstrong  
Stephen Armstrong  
Brandon Briggs  
Kevin Briscoe  
Fatim Bryd  
Lee Bullock  
Nakeia Christian  
Rasheeda Clark-Oden  
Nitia Dixon  
Ivan Draper  
Hakeem Fairley  
Jasmine Johnson  
Jonathan Johnson  
Diandra Hairston  
Ashley Hardy  
Terral Harris  
Desiree Haskins  
Joseph Hubbard  
Alaiya Hutchinson  
Darryl Locke  
Unique Mason

Donte McBeth  
Sister Omega McCoy  
Damarilis Mendez  
Dominique Mott  
Stephen Peoples  
Nellice Pitts  
Enriqua Monique Ramirez  
Ranasha Randall  
Lawrencette Reed  
Siani Rentas  
Dominique Royster  
Torrance Smith  
Anthony Stevenson  
Kimberly Williams  
Raenisha Williams  
Reiona Williams  
Richard Young

**Community Participants**

Margaret Adams  
Geraldine Bey  
Troy Berry  
Ernestine Bristow  
Maurice "Rol-X" Brown  
Khadijah Brown-Ali  
Valerie Chadwick  
Michael Cook  
Bernice Cooper  
Cynthia Barnes  
Felipe Durand  
Joseph Elam  
Loretta Ely  
Roberto Evans  
Jenaye Flamer  
Almando Gonzales

Kayon Miller  
Mrs. Neely  
Brother Patrick  
Doris Phillips  
Jean Pitts  
Evangelist Edna Scott  
Michael Smoke  
Charmaine Sudler Milligan  
James E. Rhone  
Steven Sampson  
Calvin Sutton  
Theodore Thomas  
Ruth Thompson  
George Van Norton  
Carolyn M. Washington  
Eric Westbrook  
Eva Whitley  
James E. Woodson

**Organizational Participants**

Gillespie Drexel Beacon Center  
Gratz High School Youth-Driven  
Service Learning Center  
H.E.R.O Community Center  
The Kenderton School  
Nazarene CDC  
Nictown-Tioga Branch of the  
Free Library of Philadelphia  
Nictown-Tioga Improvement Team  
North City Youth Association  
Philadelphia Mayor's Office  
of Community Services  
To Our Children's Future  
with Health  
Zion Baptist Church

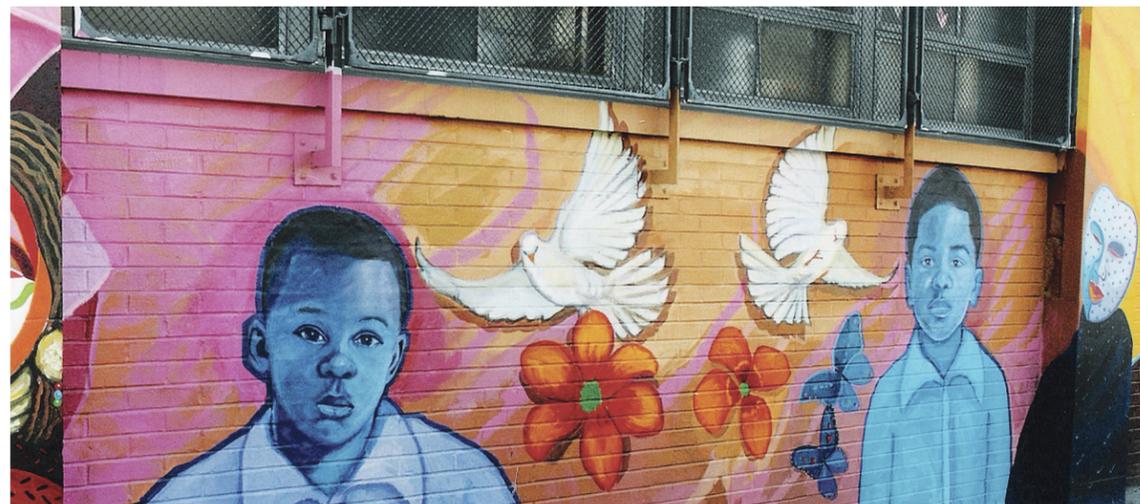


Image at top: COSACOSA Youth Council members; Image at bottom: Kenderton School mural by Abdul Ahmad beneath grated windows

## About the Artists in Residence

**Dit Wah Deng** (multimedia artist in residence) explores intercultural commonalities with his work. Born in mainland China, Deng completed apprenticeships in sculpture, fiber art and architectural engineering before arriving in Philadelphia. Deng previously led COSACOSA's *Opportunity's Gate* multimedia storytelling initiative for North Philadelphia. His award-winning public artworks include numerous large-scale installations for health-care environments and *Connection*, an 80' x 5' ceramic mural at Philadelphia International Airport created with pediatric hospital patients, celebrating themes common to all of our human experience, beyond the boundaries of culture and community. Deng has received grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Philadelphia Arts in Education Partnership.

**Kimberly Niemela** (writer in residence) COSACOSA Founder and Director, serves as an advisor to numerous community-based programs, including National Learn and Serve's Youth Visions for Stronger Neighborhoods initiative. As an artist, her work in film and sound explores multisensory memory and has been performed/exhibited in a variety of venues, including, in New York, Central Park and El Museo del Barrio and, in Philadelphia, the Painted Bride Art Center and Taller Puertorriqueño. She has received grants from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the NEA/AFI Media Arts Fellowship. Her public art designs have been widely acclaimed and featured in the international award book *Designing the World's Best Children's Hospitals*. Niemela graduated Phi Beta Kappa, summa cum laude, in music theory from the University of Pennsylvania. She also holds a degree in chemistry from Carnegie Mellon University.

**Bruce Robinson** (theater artist in residence) has been teaching and performing in Philadelphia for over thirty years. As a theater director, actor and educator, he has held major roles in productions with numerous area companies including InterAct, Novel Stages, and the Wilma Theatre. Robinson has won the Barrymore Award for "Outstanding Community Service in Theater" and the Philadelphia CBS affiliate's "People Making a Difference" award. Robinson is Founder and Artistic Director of the Fresh Visions Youth Theatre. His work includes teaching dramatic arts to special needs populations, including incarcerated and adjudicated youth.

**Ezechial Thurman** (sound artist in residence) combines music, sound art, and poetry to effect anti-racism and conflict-resolution through art-making. Founder and Director of K-Town Records, his work is presented as radio broadcasts, installation art, and public art, as well as video and audio recordings. He has worked as an art educator at numerous regional schools and community centers, including the Kenderton School and COSACOSA, where he has created more than sixty recordings with intergenerational groups of Philadelphia community members. He is the recipient of grants from the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation. Thurman holds a B.A. in Music from Colver-Stockton College (Missouri) and a M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. He also holds a diploma in vocal literature from Centro Studi Italiani and has been a tenor soloist for numerous operatic productions.

### Vocalists from the Community

**Maurice "Rol-X" Brown** is a former member of the major label recording artist rap group from North Philadelphia call Major Figgas.

**Valerie Chadwick** is a vocalist who lives in North Philadelphia. She recently completed a nursing degree at Temple University.

**Michael Smoke** is a rapper and a member of Harvest Time Christian Fellowship in North Philadelphia.

**Calvin Sutton and Kayon Miller** are a father and son team of writers and rappers living in North Philadelphia.

**Eric Westbrook** is a vocalist who recently graduated from Temple University. He currently serves as a probation officer in Philadelphia.

COSACOSA art at large  
Art creates cultural change.

Founded in 1990, COSACOSA art at large, Inc. creates new art specific to Philadelphia neighborhoods and public spaces. Through collaborative art workshops, neighborhood-based artist residencies, and media projects, we enable dialogues among our city's disparate cultures and communities. COSACOSA projects assure a sense of equality among people of diverse backgrounds and differing abilities, while building participation in local communities as well as in society at large.

COSACOSA engages people of differing backgrounds to work for the common good of their communities. In the past twenty years, COSACOSA has brought together thousands of citizens from over thirty Philadelphia neighborhoods to learn about art, about each other, and about how to work together. Each project identifies a community theme to explore through one of many possible artistic disciplines -- from tile mosaics for a school to interactive sculpture for a hospital, from audio work examining changing city neighborhoods to theatrical journeys through Philadelphia's public monuments filmed for the Smithsonian Institution. COSACOSA provokes accessible, insightful dialogues, by creating collaborative forums in which to address the common and uncommon challenges of living together.

COSACOSA continues to design and apply new models to deliver innovative and interactive "dialogues through art" directly into Philadelphia neighborhoods. For more information about COSACOSA, and to learn how to participate in our programs, please visit our website at [www.cosacosa.org](http://www.cosacosa.org).

## Site & Sound STAFF

Director/Writer in Residence	Kimberly Niemela
Multimedia Artist in Residence	Dit Wah Deng
Theater Artist in Residence	Bruce Robinson
Sound Artist in Residence	Ezechial Thurman
Program Manager	Sharnae Mask
Operations Manager	Vickie Fenton
Community Coordinator	James Branch
Educational Coordinators	Chavar Hollinger Jan Steinberg Gina Williams
Youth Coordinators	Alicia McGougan Marc Riley Michael Williams
Co-Directors, Nicetown-Tioga Improvement Team	Cynthia Barnes Charmaine Sudler-Milligan
Publication Design Development	Smart Cookie Design



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