

PA'LANTE



**PUTTING TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE
INTO PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES**

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PA'LANTE

Transformative Justice

CREDITS

Pa'lante: Putting Transformative Justice Into Practice in Schools and Communities
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CIRCLES IN OUR BONES

A FOREWORD BY DR. SAYRA OWENS PINTO

This mini book is a humble offering, and yet it is so much more. What Pa'lante offers here comes from deep practice, mistakes, failures, pain, sweat, sacrifice, and most importantly, love. The wisdom shared in these pages is born from a deep and abiding commitment to the future, informed by a vision that is sweet, gentle, beautiful, vulnerable, and humane.

I'll never forget the first time I had Pa'lante youth in a circle. I spoke to them as if they were my own. I cared about them. I wanted them to be fully equipped to take on the fight for their lives they would have to wage in school and beyond. I spoke to them to prepare them to live, and as they responded I could see that the circles were in their bones. They spoke in those spaces with the voices of their ancestors ringing at the base of their pitch. They knew what I was saying with little to no interpretive explanations and they ran with the process.

Soon they were holding their own circles and their lives became their own to live. They engaged others and began to build cultures of friendship and community that centered their belonging to the world. The young people's capacity to speak from their deepest

knowing and to befriend others is the magic that is Pa'lante. They helped me save my soul from cynicism and renewed my own sense of possibility with people like us at the helm of the work. In this way the work transforms all who are part of it as long as we are willing to be transformed. This work is not easy on any of them, adults or youth. They have had to face their personal monsters to be able to be there for others in a good way. They have been subjected to racist, sexist, and homo/transphobic hatred. And yet, there they remain working through their challenges to be a source of love to others in their city.

Some of the young people I fell in love with, who Pa'lante co-founders Jerica Coffey and Luke Woodward skillfully engaged at the beginning of the Pa'lante story, are now parents. I could not be prouder of them and of the way they roll like a pack, even to this day.

I did not agree to work with Pa'lante when they first approached me. In 2013, when a young Luke Woodward was extremely persistent in trying to connect with me regarding his new project in Holyoke, I was already in year 13 of managing dynamics of racism and cultural appropriation with circles. I worried that Luke was one

more of those nice well-meaning white people trying to do circles and looking for an Indigenous person to validate their presence within communities of color. I told myself that even though I loved Holyoke, I would not fall prey to yet another white person. I had experienced the outright refusal of white restorative justice practitioners in the Boston area and nationally to be accountable for their behavior with communities of color. I had also witnessed my white colleagues in the restorative justice center where I worked studying with indigenous people, and then purposely not consulting with them or including them in the authoring of the books they later wrote on the topic. I struggled with how to position myself. Should I leave in protest? Should I stay and be a thorn in their side?

I changed my mind when I was part of a meeting discussing a request to support launching the project that would become Pa'lante, and nobody on my team wanted to go to Holyoke. There was something about the way my colleagues disregarded the people of Holyoke that I could not stand. I raised my hand and said, "I'll go. I have people there." Pa'lante had tried to reach me on two other occasions and I fended them off. But off I went to Holyoke, and I never really left.

Thus began a relationship that endures to this day. As it turned out, Jerica and Luke did not shy away from the hard conversation about the history of circles in New England. Instead, they worked diligently to be truthful and highly accountable in their stewarding role. There have been tense and painful moments between us over time that have transformed us all. All from love for the young people, families and the place itself that is Holyoke, Mass.

I share this now because I think it is important to document the struggles that Indigenous people and people of color have taken on to protect and to fight the appropriation of circles in the Commonwealth and beyond. Pa'lante is part of that story, a good part of that story. And yet, there is so much more to do to address the harm done to the regional federally recognized tribes and to other Indigenous communities who have been shunned, ridiculed and attacked for taking a stand for the work.

I have continued to do this work because I want those of us who are allies and people of good conscience

and high moral and ethical orientations to have a way to fix what was done, to keep alive the flame of a promise that is both practical and prophetic, of communities coming together to reconstitute the Medicine Wheel. To make our world whole again. To bring about an Indigenous resurgence that is supported by others who also want a world where we exist and thrive and have regular neighborly lives. I want our lives to be that of regular people from Massachusetts who pick pumpkins in the fall, fret about ice on the roads in February and March, and who root for the Red Sox.

My involvement with Pa'lante is the highlight of my work with young people in the Commonwealth. I am proud of their unassuming, humble, and no nonsense relationship to the work and of the way they have supported the emergence of new leaders in the city of Holyoke.

Pa'lante shows us that it is possible to do good, to come together, and build long term relationships that transform our lives. It shows us that the narratives others have told themselves to justify their dishonest and unaccountable behaviors in the appropriation of circles simply reveal their own lack of ethics and imagination. It is possible to run organizations that are ethical and it is possible to do work together that belongs to everyone and where everyone leads. Pa'lante is far from perfect. However, it is capable of learning as an organization, of handling complex and difficult issues, and of remaining related and connected despite those challenges.

As it grows and matures, and because of its constant earnest learning disposition, the organization will be an important part of the process of making things right with regional Indigenous peoples and communities. I look forward to this next chapter in the work that will continue to strengthen and transform us.

HOW AND WHY TO READ THIS BOOK

Pa'lante Transformative Justice is a youth-led organization in Holyoke, MA whose mission is to build youth power to heal and transform interpersonal harm and systemic injustices. As Pa'lante Transformative Justice enters its 9th year, we reflect on our history, learnings, evolution, and impact of our work.

The students that are the 'most difficult' are the ones who need the most support, and the most care, and the village to really sit there and hold them.

— Sierra Stewart, alum and former staff member

In that spirit, we offer this “mini-book” that shares Pa'lante’s core work and lessons learned since our founding in 2015. In these pages, you will learn about our origin story and lineage, our approach to bringing Circle Practice into the Holyoke Public School System, why we ultimately separated from the Holyoke Public Schools, and how we intertwine restorative and transformative justice with youth organizing. The book can be read all the way through for a thorough orientation to our work, or picked up section by section for insights, ideas, or inspiration.

We share wisdom we have gained along the way through both successes and failures, as well as some practical advice and resources we hope will support you in growing this work in your own community. As you read, remember that it won't be possible to simply copy our approach in your context. Every community has unique needs and cultural practices, and we don't believe that a cookie cutter approach to this kind of work creates lasting change. Instead, by reading this book, we hope to introduce you to the “core” of what has made Pa'lante so special as well as reflections that may support you in your work.

You cannot be a master at this. There's always something to learn, always something to practice.

— Christopher “Domi” Lora, alum and staff member

We do not claim to be “experts” when it comes to transformative justice, Circle Practice or youth organizing (nor do we believe that anyone can be an expert in these practices). We believe that one thing that has made our work so powerful over the years is our commitment to practice. We encourage you to practice, try again, and share back what you learn!

Yes, think about yourself, reflect on your practice, okay. But then you need to test it in the world; you've got to be with people. That's important. And I hate people! So I say that as somebody who actually is really antisocial.”

— Mariame Kaba, We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice

May your work be a reflection of and a contribution to the young people where you live, and may our work collectively amplify the powerful, transformational work of young people around the world!





INTRODUCTION TO PA'LANTE

OUR HISTORY & CONTEXT

Pa'lante was launched in 2015 after a multi-year community organizing effort by students, teachers, parents and school staff, aimed at exposing, challenging and transforming school discipline policies and practices that were fueling the school-to-prison pipeline in Holyoke, Massachusetts. The school to prison pipeline refers to practices, policies, and cultures of policing, surveillance, arrest, and push-out that funnel young people from schools into the criminal justice system (including prison, juvenile justice centers, parole, house arrest, etc). (See Appendix J for resources).

In 2012, the Holyoke Public Schools had the fourth highest suspension rate of Latino students *in the country* (35%), as detailed in a nationwide report by *The Civil Rights Project at UCLA*. Latino students were twice as likely to receive an in-school suspension and three times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than white students.

Suspensions act as a funnel to the school-to-prison pipeline, as they often lead to expulsion and/or involvement in the criminal justice system. Today, Pa'lante develops powerful youth leaders who use Indigenous Circle Practice and youth organizing to resolve conflicts, reduce suspensions, decrease violence, strengthen relationships, and make meaningful change in their schools and in their community.

Pa'lante grounds our work in transformative justice and Indigenous sovereignty, as well as movements for educational justice and youth power. We draw inspiration from the Young Lords and other movement ancestors as we prepare young people to transform underlying social conditions in our school and community such as poverty, systemic racism, educational inequity, youth oppression, and intergenerational trauma.

Home to the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans outside of the island, Holyoke, Massachusetts is rich with cultural assets, creativity, and pride.

However, it is also one of the most financially impoverished and racially segregated cities in the state, with one of the state's lowest performing school districts. Students of color continue to face an opportunity gap in graduation rates, discipline rates, honors/AP enrollment, college-access, extracurricular engagement, and performance on standardized tests. English Language Learners and students with disabilities are disadvantaged further, with only about two thirds graduating in four years (MA DOE, 2022).

From 2015-2022, Pa'lante operated as a program of the Holyoke Public Schools (HPS), despite the school district contributing only about 10% of its budget. While Pa'lante staff raised funds for the program through private foundations, state grants, and individual donors, the school and district still had ultimate control over our work. For example, we were not able to set staff schedules, salary or benefits in accordance with program needs and values (leaving our lowest paid workers without paid time off and many of us working 10 hour days). We were required to obtain school district approval to apply for new funding, at times preventing us from doing the work we saw was most urgently needed. We had always been willing to make some compromises in order to continue doing our critical work in the schools, but by 2021, the tensions between Pa'lante and school/district leaders, particularly around our youth organizing work within the schools, reached a level at which we knew something needed to change in order to stay aligned with our values.

In the summer of 2021, we sought to address these challenges by moving toward becoming our own independent organization. We proposed to school and district leaders that we continue our transformative work in the Holyoke Public Schools as a community partner. They expressed concern that they already felt Pa'lante's work was out of step with their values and approach, and they feared this would be exacerbated if we were autonomous. From our perspective, they seemed to feel hurt and threatened by our work to support young people to develop and use their power to fight for justice for themselves and their peers at school. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, we



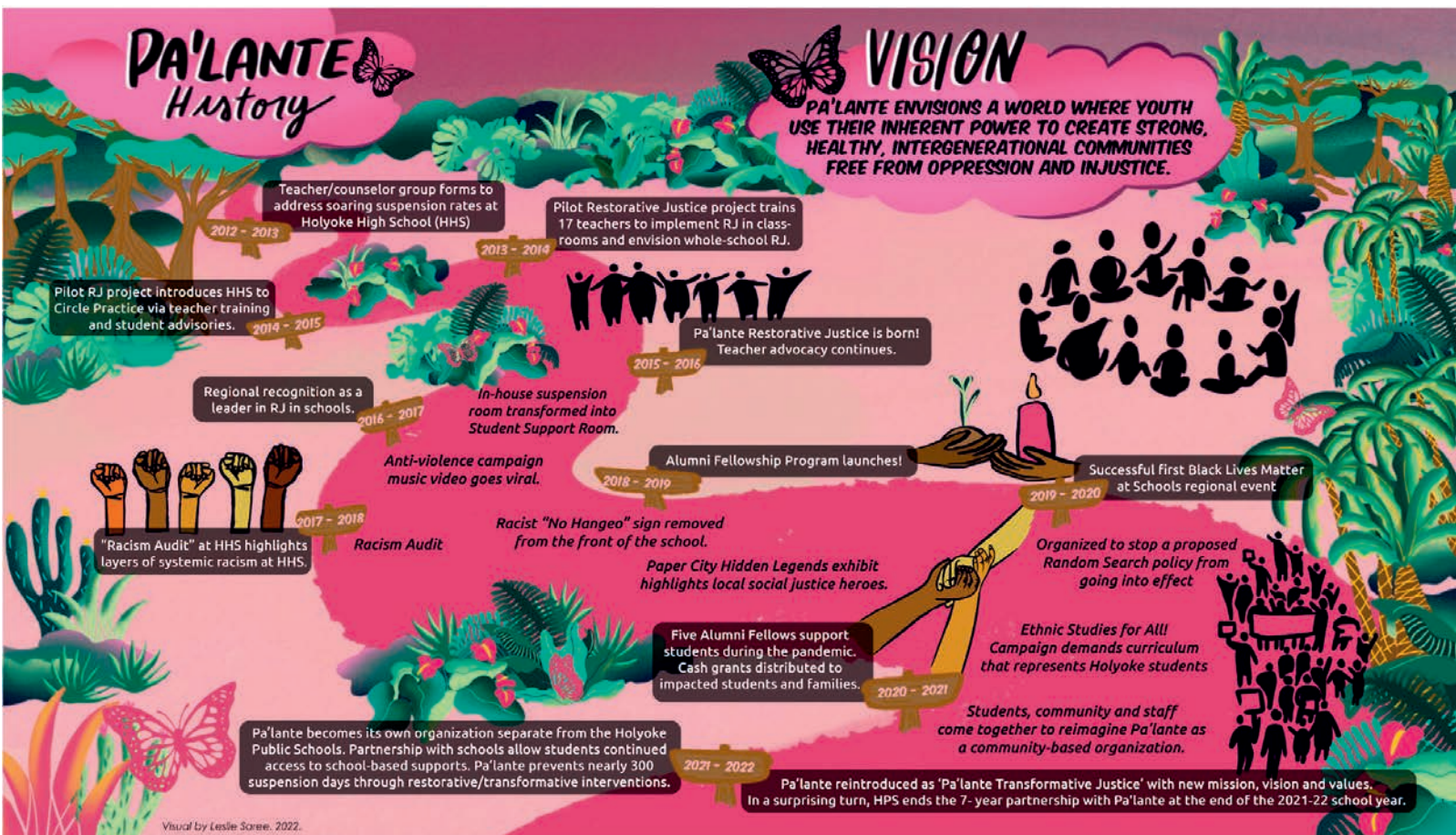
were not able to come to an agreement with school and district leaders for how to move forward, and we made the difficult decision to separate from HPS and move most of our work outside of the schools. We hoped to keep some Pa'lante staff working onsite within the schools, but ultimately in June 2022, the schools ended the partnership with us and at this writing have been unwilling to work with us.

Our founding name was *Pa'lante Restorative Justice*, but as we became our own organization, we decided to change our name to *Pa'lante Transformative Justice* to better reflect the spirit

and intentions of our work. We don't just want our work to "restore" relationships and systems to how they used to be, we want to transform them into something new and better for everyone!

In 2022, Pa'lante launched a pilot version of our new **Youth Leadership Hub** to serve youth who have disengaged from and/or been pushed out of school, those engaged in street economies, and those harmed by the criminal legal system. In 2023, we purchased a building and opened a new, improved version of the Hub, which youth leaders dubbed "The Meta".

We worked with artist, Téyo Saree, to create this timeline that shares a bit more about our history and how we got to where we are today.





WHO WE ARE

**There are four main groups that make up Pa'lante:
Our Base, Peer Leaders, Staff (including Alumni Staff)
and our Board of Directors.**



“At the heart of Pa'lante is love and liberation, both personal and collective. We know that our individual healing and liberation are bound up with one another's. We do our own work and we also show up for each other. There are no bad kids. There are no bad people. That is at the heart of how we operate.”

— Luke Midnight-Woodward, co-founder and Co-Executive Director

OUR BASE

When we were housed within a school, our base included all students enrolled in Holyoke High School and we connected with students through school-based restorative justice work and school and community events. Now, our base includes all youth of color in Holyoke who are affected by heavy policing, eurocentric schooling, and other forms of racism and economic disenfranchisement. Pa'lante creates a space for

these young people through the Meta, which offers drop-in hours, groups, connection to services and resources, and therapeutic supports. To borrow language from one of our “crush” organizations, Assatta’s Daughters in Chicago, we think of these as “Revolutionary Services” that help our base sustain their involvement in the movement, navigate capitalism, and to thrive in spite of it.



PEER LEADERS

“Pa’lante has given me a sense of direction for the future and showed me not only the beauty of my city and community; but the beautiful and wonderful things that can happen when youth are empowered.”

— Janeyah Madera, Peer Leader, class of 2025

We believe that young people, especially those most impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline, must be at the center of our work on every level. Pa’lante is a by-youth-for-youth program. Our youth both do the work *and* benefit from access to support in transforming conflict, coping with loss/grief/trauma, developing leadership skills, and being part of changing their school and community for the better. Peer Leaders learn to host circles for peers, develop community organizing skills, and implement strategies in the community that get at the root of oppression and injustice.

Many peer leaders refer to Pa’lante as a second family, and adult staff feel the same. This sense of family is at the heart of our ability to build transformative youth leadership.

MORE ABOUT PA’LANTE PEER LEADERS*:

- 93% BIPOC
- ages 14-19
- One third of PLs are on IEPs and/or have a self-disclosed disability
- 55% are LGBTQIA
- Almost all (98%) of these youth are from poor or working class backgrounds
- 10% are homeless, unaccompanied, or unstably housed
- 75% of Pa’lante PLs are Puerto Rican. Other represented ethnicities include: multiracial (15%), Dominican (10%), African American (10%), Columbian (5%), and white (5%)
- 12% of PLs speak Spanish as their first language and most are bilingual
- 70% report having experienced violence
- about a third have a family member currently or previously incarcerated

*Identities and Demographics as of 2023

STAFF

We believe that those most impacted by systems of oppression are in the best position to dismantle them, so we work hard to ensure our staff reflects the young people we serve.

Our team is currently composed of people with the following demographics:

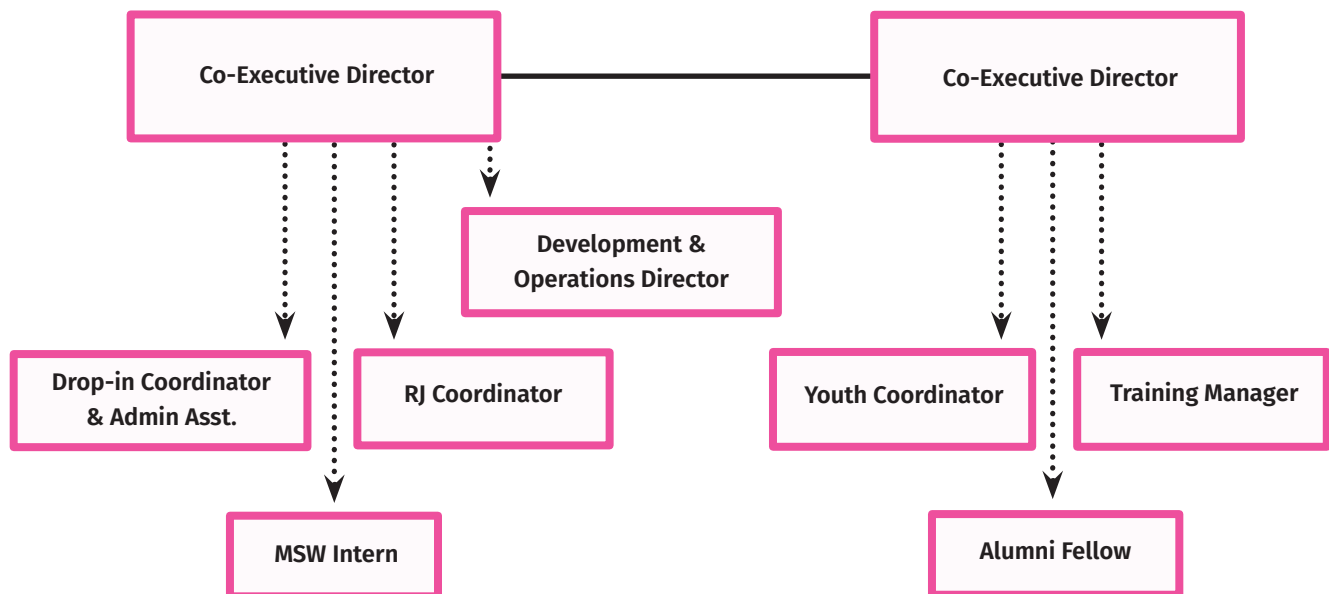
- 88% People of Color
- 50% LGBTQ-identified,
- 50% under the age of 25,
- 63% bilingual in English and Spanish
- 63% Pa'lante alumni

“Being a peer leader really lights a fire in you. Generations of peer leaders building on each other’s work like our ancestors have really gives you a sense of pride. I think that that same fire brings you back to the work to create space for youth to drive the change and stand on their own truth.”

— Katelynn Cruz, alum and staff member



PA'LANTE TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE ORG CHART





BOARD OF DIRECTORS

"I've always been passionate about Pa'lante and it's been such an important part of my life for so long now. Being on the board is a way for me to share my perspective as someone who knows where we come from and has gotten to see how we have transformed over the years."

— Alyzza Fontanez, Pa'lante alum and Board of Directors Co-Chair

In 2017, Pa'lante created our Community Advisory Board (CAB) made up of parents, Pa'lante alumni, activists, academics, elected officials and others who began to meet monthly to provide support, advice, advocacy, and guidance. We created a paid CAB Coordinator consultant position at 10 hours per month to organize the CAB, with particular focus on recruitment and retention of parents and community members. The CAB became a

beautiful, lively intergenerational space where youth connected with supportive adults from the community and worked together toward a common goal. It also served as a way for Pa'lante alumni to stay involved in our work.

When we became our own 501c3 non-profit organization in 2023, we transitioned from our beloved Community Advisory Board (CAB) to a more formal Board of Directors. Important decisions have always gone through our CAB, and are now discussed and voted on by our Board. This new structure actually builds in more power for the youth, alumni, and community members on our Board and more accountability for the organization. In order to make sure that young people remain at the center of organizational decision-making, we designed our bylaws to require the Board be made up of at least 50% current and former youth leaders.



WHAT WE DO

Pa'lante has always focused on four areas of work: youth organizing, indigenous Circle Practice, restorative/transformative justice, and building youth leadership. These areas are both distinct and overlapping, and each connects us to not only what we do, but also where we come from and how we do our work. From 2015 through 2022, this was our mission statement:

Pa'lante's mission is to build youth power, center student voice, and organize for policies and practices that dismantle the school to prison pipeline in Holyoke and beyond.

After becoming its own organization in 2022, Pa'lante youth leaders, alumni, staff, and Community Advisory Board members engaged in a four-month, in-depth strategic planning process that produced a revised mission, vision, and values (See Appendix L), as well as a clear logic model, organizational structure, and five-year Strategic Plan. Our revised mission reflects our intention to extend our work beyond the schools:

Rooted in Holyoke, MA, Pa'lante Transformative Justice builds youth power to heal and transform interpersonal harm and systemic injustices.



YOUTH ORGANIZING

Pa'lante is grounded in youth organizing because we know that the problems facing youth in Holyoke are not isolated or individual, but rather connected to long histories of disenfranchisement and harm. To only address an issue at an interpersonal level leaves the roots of oppression intact. Pa'lante organizes to transform the root causes of oppression, so we can make long-lasting and meaningful change in our communities.

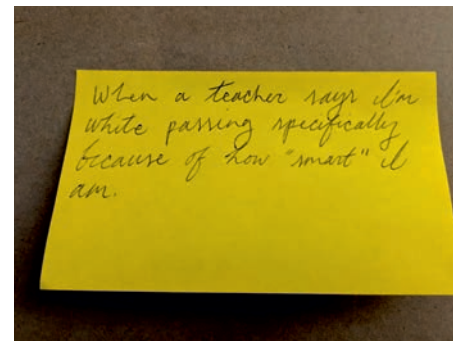
Pa'lante specifically draws inspiration from the Young Lords, a revolutionary civil rights group that fought for liberation of Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and all colonized peoples. We also learn from the Black Panthers and other lineages of young people of color fighting for justice in their communities. Pa'lante's youth organizing model is rooted in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Grounded in critical pedagogy, YPAR gives youth an opportunity to research a problem that's affecting them and to then take action and organize around solutions. Through YPAR projects, youth develop agency, critical thinking skills, and tools to advocate for themselves. Pa'lante Co-Founder Jerica Coffey and University of Massachusetts Professor [Antonio Nieves Martinez](#) were instrumental in bringing this model to Pa'lante. Antonio has since passed away, so we honor him as we stand on his shoulders.

"Youth of color have always been at the forefront of transformative movements for social change. That's a legacy they can own, and leave behind for their younger brothers and sisters and people in the community coming after them."

— Jerica Coffey, Pa'lante Co-founder

Over the years, Pa'lante youth were able to use YPAR to accomplish the following:

1) Student Support Room: Pa'lante advocated to transform our school's in-house suspension room into a Student Support Room to address the root causes of student disengagement. In 2015-16, the in-house suspension room was just rows of desks and a place to put "bad kids." Pa'lante Peer Leaders interviewed and surveyed students who spent time there, as well as teachers whose students spent time there, the coordinator of the room (who was a long-term sub), and administrators. Their findings confirmed what we already knew: that the in-school suspension room did not support disengaged students in returning to a learning environment, and that teachers were impacted by the absence of these students from their classroom communities. The students gave recommendations of what should happen in the in-house suspension room, including peer and professional therapeutic supports. While it took ongoing work to maintain the integrity of Pa'lante youth leaders' vision, the Student Support Room continues to be an integral part of Holyoke High School today.



2) Hidden Legends: During the 2017-18 school year, Pa'lante peer leaders conducted a YPAR project examining how racism operates at Holyoke High School. Their research revealed many examples of racial inequity, leading them to focus the 2018-19 school year on taking action against racism. One aspect of racism illuminated by Pa'lante's research was inequities in visual representations throughout the school, as well students' profound lack of access to histories of communities of color. A particularly striking example was the school's Hall of Fame, which features a wall of portraits of distinguished HHS graduates, of which 98% are white and 90% are male, whereas the student population was only 23% white and 46% male.

Pa'lante wanted to create a space in the school that celebrated Holyoke's diversity and the rich history of social activism in the city. Toward that end, youth devoted themselves to creating a permanent exhibit that they dubbed, "Paper

City Hidden Legends." Pa'lante's peer leaders conducted rigorous research throughout the school year through interviews, oral histories, literature review and archival research in an effort to illuminate the stories of the activists, organizers, and leaders on whose shoulders they stand. In May 2019, Pa'lante hosted a packed event to induct the first 25 Hidden Legends into a permanent exhibit in the school, giving Holyoke High School students access to their histories and legacies for generations to come.

Pa'lante also partnered with El Corazón of Holyoke, a placemaking project that develops culturally responsive public art projects and installations reflective of Holyoke's downtown communities. Through this partnership, the city of Holyoke invited Pa'lante to display the photos on giant banners on Main Street, in the heart of the city's new Puerto Rican cultural district.



3) Prevent a racist random search policy from going into effect:

In 2019, Holyoke Public Schools announced a Random Search Policy that would allow students to randomly be chosen to have their belongings searched by administrators. There were a number of factors as to why the Holyoke High School administration said that they wanted a random search policy, including threats of school gun violence by youth in a neighboring city and nervous parents. The principal slipped the announcement of the new policy into an email sent right before Christmas vacation.

Students did not agree with the policy at all. Many students felt that it was humiliating to be randomly chosen and have your bag looked through. Pa'lante peer leaders leapt into action and began to research the efficacy of this type of policy in improving safety in schools. Unsurprisingly, they found that random search policies are not an effective way to create a safe school culture and started campaigning and organizing to prevent the new HHS policy from going into effect.

Some key findings included:

- ZERO correlation between random searches and school violence prevention
- Majority POC schools are far more likely to have increased strict security measures, even after controlling for school crime, neighborhood crime and school disorder
- When LAUSD implemented a similar policy, zero guns were found. Less than 1% of items confiscated were weapons (which included butter knives, art supplies, and defensive spray)
- Random searches increase: school disorder, student stress, antisocial behavior, frustration and anger
- Random searches worsen: academic performance, student behavior, relationships between students and administration The principal created several community forums for students and families to voice their concerns about the policies. Pa'lante organized 150+ students and community members to show up and be heard.

Pa'lante youth pressured school leaders to hold several public forums to address the issue, organized to get youth, parents and community to attend, and then presented their findings at the events. The administration perceived the large turnout as an attack on the principal, even though none of the young people said anything insulting or directed at his character. They shared courageously from their personal experiences, revealed their research findings, and asked for the policy to be overturned. It was powerful to see some of the most marginalized students in our school dare to speak up. School and district leaders did not change course until the end of the 2019-20 school year, when they finally made the right decision and reversed the policy.

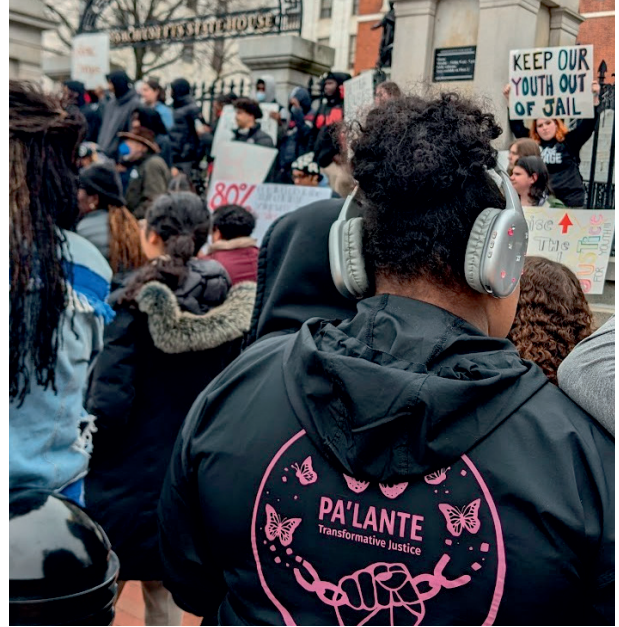


"This sets a precedent that students have power, we have voice, and we can accomplish absolutely anything."

— Salome Moreno,
Palante alumna



See our [infographic](#) on Random Searches on our website.



4) Ethnic Studies for All:

In 2021, Holyoke High School had a small, but mighty Ethnic Studies Program. Pa'lante Peer Leaders decided to do their annual YPAR project on “Ethnic Studies for All,” to advocate for a graduation requirement for all ninth graders to take ethnic studies.

Through a series of focus groups and surveys, Pa'lante Peer Leaders found that ethnic studies promotes a positive school culture, supports students to become leaders in their communities, and engages “disengaged learners.” In addition to Pa'lante’s research, teachers and students also expressed lots of support for the Ethnic Studies Program.

Despite Pa'lante’s findings, administration started to announce changes happening to the Ethnic Studies Program that diminished its impact, rather than expanding it. Most notably, they removed a department head position. This meant that instead of having a full-time director, a teacher would also serve as the department head, taking away time and resources from the program.

In the end, Pa'lante and Ethnic Studies students were unable to convince the administration to reverse their changes. However, the Ethnic Studies Department continues to be a much needed place for students to learn their histories, honor their cultures, and engage in social change.

Please see “Nuts and Bolts” on page 37 for a breakdown of the steps we take in conducting our Youth Participatory Action projects.



INDIGENOUS CIRCLE PRACTICE

Pa'lante's work is also grounded in Indigenous Circle Practice, as learned primarily from Dr. Sayra Pinto, our organization's mentor since 2014. Dr. Pinto learned from Harold and Phil Gatensby of the Inland Tlingit Nation in the Yukon and was also mentored by John Mohawk, a Seneca statesman of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

We learned from Sayra Pinto that Circle as a practice was shared by Phil and Harold Gatensby with the West because they believe in its power to help heal the harm that many institutions have enacted. Not all people who do circles have asked for permission or been supported by Indigenous people to do so. And not all Indigenous peoples are comfortable with non tribal members holding these processes. In Phil and Harold Gatensby's case, their work was appropriated by mainstream restorative justice practitioners who did not ask for permission and were not invited to apply this practice. To learn more about this, we recommend reading Dr. Pinto's writings at lovingfuture.org.

Cultural appropriation is what happens when people with personal, interpersonal, and institutional power in a racialized society adopt, adapt, claim ownership, and rob people of their traditional cultural practices, cultural adaptations, and innovations to gain personal, reputational, monetary, and institutional advantages within that racialized society.

We believe that this is what has been done with the indigenous circle process by many in the restorative, transformative, and healing justice movements.



"I remember my first circle here and how it felt to get to know everyone. It felt so good to be able to say my part, and it has helped me to communicate better, to become less reactive, and to listen to other people's point of view."

— Jasmine Concepcion,
Peer Leader, class of 2027

Many people ask what it takes to be trained and have permission to do circles. We at For a Loving Future do not believe training is possible. We believe that the idea of training is actually counterproductive to the practice of circles. We also know that training mistakes form for substance. We are encountering people who have spent time, money, and used their relationships to become circle keepers who actually have very little idea of what circles are and what they are for, and consequently, continue to carry harmful behaviors and attitudes about power, difference, and the meaning of community. We are saddened by their sense of loss and confusion when they are actually in the presence of the practice. We think what has been done to them is irresponsible and harmful.

— Dr. [Sayra Pinto](#), excerpt from *Circles and Cultural Appropriation*

Through Circle Practice, we learn about who we are, who our people are, and how to build strong and healthy communities. On the individual level, young people learn and teach social emotional skills and conflict resolution. On the relationship level, Pa'lante encourages young people impacted by violence to bring in family and friends to participate "in circle," building and nourishing a web of support that extends beyond Pa'lante.

Historically, these circles have taken place primarily at school and during school hours. We are now building our capacity to offer circles outside of the school setting. We are developing partnerships in order to offer youth-led accountability and support circles to youth involved in the criminal legal system. In 2023, we began to offer youth-led circles to systems impacted youth.

Our activism is informed by our relationship to Circle. Because we intentionally practice creating a space where everyone belongs, we begin to organize with those values and principles. Instead of organizing from a reactionary place, we begin organizing from a place of community, connection, and possibility.

Harold and Phil Gatenby began to use circles in the context of restorative justice in the 80s. Since then, circles have been used within the field of restorative justice to address harm in communities by engaging people in processes of accountability.

Much has been written about circles in the restorative justice field. However, the use of circles in restorative justice efforts has become dominated by White professionals employed by criminal justice institutions that have little to no exposure to indigenous ways of thinking and of being in community.

There has been little to no attention paid to issues of oppression, race, power, and privilege in the application of circles. This is highly problematic given the fact that communities of color are disproportionately at risk of engagement with the criminal justice system.



[Circles and Cultural Appropriation](#)



— Dr. Sayra Pinto
[Restorative Justice](#)

RESTORATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE

Restorative Justice (RJ) is a movement to create alternatives to addressing harm that are rooted in repair and community, rather than punishment. As mentioned earlier in this section, many practitioners in the field of Restorative Justice have misappropriated Circle Practice in their contexts. Restorative Justice as a field is not monolithic. You can read more about the history of restorative justice and Circle Practice from our mentor Sayra Pinto (lovingfuture.org/restorative-justice).



For a long time, our name was Pa'lante Restorative Justice because restorative justice is a term that is more familiar, especially in a school context. Many people have worked hard to bring restorative justice into educational spaces, including organizers with Black Lives Matter in Schools. We also have learned a lot from resources created by organizations like Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY), Dignity in Schools, and New York Coalition of Radical Educators (NYCORE). In 2022, we decided to change our name to Pa'lante Transformative Justice because as we moved to align more with our values, Transformative Justice felt more accurate.

Transformative Justice (TJ) is a separate, but overlapping, movement with Restorative Justice. Transformative Justice is rooted in the idea that communities can be resourced to respond to harm in ways that don't rely on the police/criminal (in)justice system, and that we cannot just "restore"

relationships, communities, and systems, but we must transform them. When a system was designed to cause harm, working within that system risks upholding the status quo. We have learned a lot about transformative justice from activists and writers such as [Mia Mingus](#), [Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha](#), [Mariame Kaba](#), and [Generation Five](#).



"That does not mean, however, there should be no consequences. It means real consequences. Consequences that really matter. It means transforming the conditions that exist in the first place for this to even have happened. It is really critical for people to think about the difference between punishment and consequences. Punishment often is actually not the same as transformation. Even though it feels good to wear the "kill the rapists" T-shirt, that isn't the thing that is actually going to get us the world we want to live in."

– Mariame Kaba, We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice

Pa'lante put RJ and TJ concepts into practice at Holyoke High School from 2015-2022 through both youth-led Circle Practice and other interventions. Data from the 2021-22 school year showed that Pa'lante received nearly 200 referrals for restorative interventions for over 400 students, 93% of whom reported feeling like the process resolved the issue. In cases involving physical violence amongst students, 96% of restorative justice circles resulted in no further threats or acts of violence. The program also played a significant role in reducing the school's suspension rate, with 281 days of suspension prevented during that school year alone.



BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Like many low-income communities, “success” in Holyoke is too frequently defined as being able to escape to somewhere else - university, a bigger/more affluent city, etc. By creating a leadership pathway rooted in Holyoke, we hope to disrupt this narrative and show that a sustained connection with one’s community is also a form of success. Pa’lante is structured to support Peer Leaders during and after high school to become leaders in their communities. In Pa’lante we believe there are many ways to be a leader. Sometimes, it looks like organizing a protest and speaking to a crowd about justice and injustice. Sometimes, it looks like creating art to move people. Sometimes it means serving food to elders and community members who show up at our events. In Pa’lante, Peer Leaders define what leadership means to them and grow their gifts and capacities to step into whatever leadership role calls most to them.

Young adulthood is a difficult stage for all people, but is especially difficult in a city like Holyoke where there is a severe lack in educational and employment opportunities. We’ve created employment and leadership opportunities through the Alumni Fellowship Program, which has led to our program being predominantly staffed by former Peer Leaders. The Alumni program creates a place for peer leaders to continue doing their most purposeful social-change work in their home-city.

To read more about how we think about Youth Leadership, refer to “Youth Leadership” in our principles of practice. To learn more specifically about how our leadership pathways work, refer to “Leadership Development” in the Nuts and Bolts section.

PRINCIPLES OF PRACTICE

- Know your history
- Connect interpersonal and systemic issues
- Consent and Self-Determination
- Youth leadership
- Embrace Contradictions & Paradoxes
- Start small
- Walk the talk
- Be open to the experiment



Heidi Ambrose

Pa'lante's work attempts to put the visionary and revolutionary ideas of abolition and transformative justice into practice. This work is always imperfect and often messy, especially as we work in close relationships with people and institutions that do not share our vision, values or commitments. On a daily basis, in very practical ways, we hold the tension between the clarity of our values and the many compromises we make to live and work in the world as it currently is. What follows are some principles that have supported us to align and realign our work with our values as we strive to avoid the constant pull toward cooptation by systems designed to colonize, harm and oppress.

"Prison abolition is more than a politic, it's a daily practice."

– Shira Hassan, writer, organizer & lifelong harm reductionist and prison abolitionist.



KNOW YOUR HISTORY

Circles in restorative justice are now the tools at the disposal of unrepresentative institutions to implement processes that can easily become oppressive to people of color. I know this because I often run into people of color who refuse to sit in circle process as a result of past experiences of cultural appropriation, misuse of power, misunderstanding of the core philosophies and mechanics of the process, and a general sense of lack of psychological safety.

In the 21st century, many practitioners have begun to understand the need to connect to Elders and teachers to create relationships of accountability and support in their work with communities and institutions. A desire to be in right relationship with this process burns deeply in the hearts and minds of many practitioners. As restorative practices/justice applications of circles are largely devoid of connections to communities, to Elders and teachers, and to the cultural/historical/spiritual underpinnings of circles, it is evident that there needs to be a course correction process to encourage these efforts to be rooted in relationships of nurturance and accountability.

— Sayra Pinto, excerpt from <https://lovingfuture.org/restorative-justice>

OUR EXPERIENCE

Restorative Justice and Circle Practice are often understood to be the same thing, however they have separate (but overlapping) histories. We believe that understanding the histories of these practices is a vital part of the work that we do. We recommend first reading the above section on “What We Do” to learn more. From there, let’s look at the history of Restorative Justice.

Restorative Justice is a relatively new field that took hold in the 1980s and ‘90s that brings all people impacted by harm together (“victims,” “offenders,” and “community members”) to examine the impacts on each person or group and decide what can be done to repair that harm. This process gives the person who committed an act of harm an opportunity to fulfill their obligation to repair. Restorative Justice was created as a response to the traditional western (in)justice system which is shaped by paradigms of punishment, rather than repair.

If you don’t continue to recognize the history of circle practice and where it comes from, and its Indigeneity, it’s just an injustice to the practice itself.

— Sierra Stewart, alum and former staff member



Circle Practice is an ancient practice and tool for self-governance that was introduced to the Restorative Justice movement by Indigenous people. The story of this introduction that we know most intimately begins when Phil and Harold Gatensby began bringing Circle Practice to their local court system in the Yukon in the 1980s in an effort “to transform the relationship between the justice system and their own Tlingit community.”¹ Many other Indigenous nations practice Circles and work to transform institutions such as schools, court systems, and healthcare so they can become more welcoming and inclusive.

Since those introductions, Restorative Justice has often relied on some version of Circle Practice as



My grandma’s Indigenous. She didn’t talk about circles, but I’ve seen some photos and she’s sitting in a circle. This is something...it connects. It made me comfortable.

— Aleyx Bernard, alum and staff member

a tool to restore communities and repair harm. Too often, restorative justice practitioners have co-opted Circle Practice and disconnected the practice from its Indigenous teachings, causing significant harm to some Indigenous people and communities. As [Sayra Pinto](#) explains, “Much has been written about circles in the restorative justice field. However, the use of circles in restorative justice efforts has become dominated by White professionals employed by criminal justice institutions that have little to no exposure to indigenous ways of thinking and of being in community.”

The history of Circle Practice dates back much further than the beginning of the Restorative Justice movement, and well before the United States’ criminal justice system. Circle Practice is much more than a response to violence, harm, and conflict. It is a form of both self- governance and ceremony. Many Indigenous nations still maintain Circle as a foundational way of being in the world.

In Holyoke, the importance of Indigenous education is personal for many youth. Most of Pa’lante’s peer leaders have Indigenous roots in the Caribbean and have been disconnected from those roots after nearly 500 years of colonial conditioning

both in the Caribbean and in the United States. Learning an Indigenous form of Circle Practice brings many in Pa’lante’s community closer to understanding and exploring our own connection to indigeneity and to our own humanity. However, we know that learning this practice as people who are re-connecting to roots is much different than being of a culture that has held onto its indigenous practices. We feel it is important to always acknowledge where these practices come from and how we were taught them. To forget the lineage of Circle Practice is to participate in the erasure of Indigenous peoples, their histories and contributions.

Understanding this history and actively engaging with the complicated and often painful relationship between the Restorative Justice Movement and Indigenous people is critical as we seek to do this work in the least harmful, most accountable and transformative way possible.

People lost their lives for this. They sacrificed so much for this practice, and it’s a way of living, being, carrying yourself.

— Cristopher “Domi” Lora, alum and staff member

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Do your own research into the histories of Restorative Justice and Circle Practice. See the appendix for some great resources. Name your teachers and the lineages of your practices - do not participate in their erasure. If you learn from elders, feed that relationship. And if you don’t have that relationship, then do the work to connect. Connect with the Indigenous Peoples and teachings of the land you’re living and working on and help move resources to support indigenous organizing and governance.





CONNECT INTERPERSONAL AND SYSTEMIC ISSUES

OUR EXPERIENCE

When we host a circle, it is often to address some sort of interpersonal conflict or challenge. On the surface, it may seem like the conflict ends at that interpersonal level. While individual choices are an important piece of the puzzle, they are never the whole story. We take the time to dig deeper and understand and transform social and environmental contexts that create the conditions for conflict and violence. In our experience, school leaders welcomed our support in preventing and addressing conflict and violence, but were not always aligned with our values and broader goals. We made a practice of reminding ourselves that, as freedom scholar Dr. Beth Richie says, “our goal is not ending violence. It is liberation.”

In a school context, discipline is typically designed to be an individualized response to unwanted behavior through punishment. The systemic forces affecting the lives of young people are rarely considered during school disciplinary hearings. Sometimes there is an attempt to provide more support to a student, but there is almost never an effort to change the system that has been harming the young person we are working with. So we punish the student, perhaps provide some new supports, and then send them off into the same situation and hope for a different outcome.

Through our work, we witness over and over how often the root cause of personal and interpersonal

issues are systemic. Here is an example: Juan is arriving at school late most days. Maybe he needs to walk his younger siblings to school before getting himself to school. Maybe he lives too close to school to get a bus pass but doesn't feel safe walking in his neighborhood. Maybe he is experiencing a health or mental health issue that is affecting his sleep and hasn't been able to access medical or mental health care. If we only assign punishment based on Juan's tardiness, we risk punishing students for the life circumstances and systemic failures they were born into. If we punish him and assign him to see a school counselor for 15 minutes per week (a common solution), that doesn't address the safety issue in his neighborhood.

When students are “disciplined” through suspension or other forms of social removal, the end result is often more harm and disconnection. The social inequity that is often at the root of a discipline problem becomes amplified in a continued cycle. To counter this cycle, Pa'lante's alternative approach to support and accountability at school offers deeper opportunities to repair harm *and* transform conditions that harm occurs in.



“Pa'lante challenges the dehumanizing conditions that exist in schools that cause young people to feel marginalized and disconnected from themselves, from each other, and from our school communities.

We were always willing to deal with things at the root...Because it's not enough to just have students circling up, i.e. dealing with problems as they arise on the surface. For us, for the work to be transformative, it really does require us to be dealing with the deeper causes of the challenges that arise in our schools.”

— Jerica Coffey, Pa'lante co-founder

A systems analysis gives us a way to notice patterns of behavior, identify root causes, develop a compassionate understanding of the various ways that young people respond to oppression in their lives, and ultimately support young people to build power together in service of changing those root causes. Restorative justice work that is not rooted in an analysis of (and intentional work to transform) systemic oppression can often cause more harm, especially to those most impacted by systemic oppression.

By connecting systemic issues to interpersonal problems, we seek deeper healing, with an impact that will leave a legacy for generations to come. It is all connected, and we actually can't focus on one without the other. This is why we make collective action (through organizing/YPAR) central to our work: we know that if we don't, young people of color are going to continue to face the same barriers that push them out of school. It is powerful for young people to learn how the world is functioning around them, and how those systems can affect us as individuals and communities more broadly.

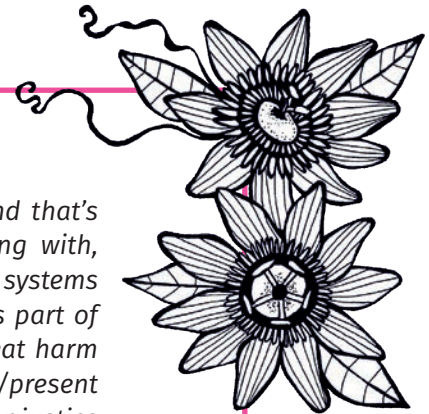


“Taking on systemic challenges and not shying away from that can be a much bigger commitment to this work - of time and resources and energy - but it always felt like the right thing to do.”

— Jerica Coffey, Pa'lante co-founder

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Your context, structure and work may look very different from ours, and that's good! But we think no matter where you are or who you are working with, transformative justice work and Circle Practice need to be connected to systems change work. Especially if you are using Indigenous Circle Practice, it is part of that practice to bring balance to power. Indigenous people suffered great harm to preserve and share the gift of Circle. Our work should honor its history/present by using Circle not only for personal and interpersonal repair, but also for justice and liberation. Hold onto the possibility of transformation - for somebody who's harmed somebody or broken a rule, and also for the systems that are hurting all of us.





Consent means that we're trusting each other enough to start building a relationship, whether that's just us sitting side by side having a conversation, or in Circle.

— Sierra Stewart, alum and former staff

CONSENT AND SELF-DETERMINATION

member **OUR EXPERIENCE**

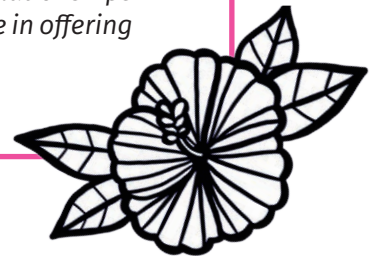
A core value that we learned from our teacher, Sayra Pinto, is around consent and choice when it comes to Circle Practice.

In many schools, Circle is mandated either through restorative justice processes or through advisories or other classroom-based community Circle initiatives. We know this doesn't work because we tried to do it ourselves and failed! This is a sure way to alienate both the adults forced to host a circle and the youth forced to participate. (See more detail in *Start Small*, below)

It is okay that some people aren't ready or don't want to participate in a Circle. There are lots of ways to come together to address a problem! When we each get to make a conscious choice to participate, Circle can be an antidote to violence, harm, abuse, and oppression. However, when it's forced, it becomes just another tool to control and oppress.

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Find ways to ensure that everyone has the choice to participate or not participate in Circle. If you're having trouble getting young people to show up by their own free will, think about changing your approach. Focus on building relationships rather than being attached to one way of doing things and get creative in offering alternative options for those that choose not to participate.



YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Depending on the input from the youth, we staff may have to pivot because we definitely want their voices to be louder than ours.

— Christopher “Domi” Lora

OUR EXPERIENCE

We strive to center the leadership of young people, particularly youth of color, queer and trans youth, and youth with disabilities, because they are most impacted by the school to prison pipeline, and therefore know best what they need and what solutions will be most impactful. We know that young people of color are brilliant, capable and visionary. We work hard to set up structures that involve youth of color in decision-making at every level of the organization.

Pa'lante alumna and former staff member, Sierra Stewart, explains how we build youth buy-in at Pa'lante by including youth in conversations they normally wouldn't be invited to. For example, this means being very transparent about the program, like:

- “Here’s my salary. This is how I got my salary and this is where all the money is going in the organization. Do you think what we’re doing is correct?”
- Do you think we should be putting more money into this? Or into this?
- What should we do for the month? What type of workshops? Should we host an event?
- What community organizations do we want to collaborate with? Do they align with our values?
- Should we respond to this thing that just happened in the community? Does it align with our YPAR project for the year? And if not, should we table it for a different time?



The youth should make most, if not all, the decisions. Obviously, there’s certain things that may be beyond their skills, but even then we should help them develop those skills. Youth should make a majority of all the decisions.

— Aleyx Bernard, alum and staff member



MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Most schools that have a restorative justice program have an adult coordinator who takes cases and facilitates a process. It’s more work to recruit and develop students to lead the work, but it will make it far more effective! Think creatively in your context about how to make time and space for student leadership development, whether it’s during the school day or after school.



AN EXAMPLE OF A YOUTH-LED CIRCLE

We had a circle where two students (who had been friends) had an interaction in their history that was a violation of consent for one of the students. At the time that it happened, the student who felt violated had said, “It’s fine” and laughed it off.

But as the years went on, and she learned more about consent and more about different violations that had happened in her own life, she started to reflect on that moment with her friend in a different way. She started to feel betrayed by that moment.

The two friends had drifted apart and she chose to disengage from that friendship. Then, when she learned about Circles, she decided she wanted to do a circle with him.

Around the same time, Pa’lante had been sponsoring a healthy relationships after-school program that was called The Rev Club, and her friend - the student that had violated her boundaries- had been part of that club.

When a Pa’lante staff member approached this student about doing a circle with his friend, we weren’t sure how it was going to go. We didn’t know if he would remember the incident, if he would feel defensive, or if he had a different version of events.

When we explained the situation, he started crying, and he said,

“I’ve been going to Rev Club and I learned that what I did wasn’t okay.”

He immediately agreed to do the Circle. We had a peer leader host the Circle who was a mutual friend of both of the students. The peer leader created a sense of safety for both students to share their experience.

During the Circle, the student who had violated a boundary offered a deeply heartfelt apology and reflection on his own behavior at the time and his growth since.

He said, “I feel it every day, when I look at you, that I did that to you, and I’m really sorry. And I wouldn’t make the same choices now.”

It was a really beautiful and powerful moment for both of them, and for the Pa’lante staff and student hosts who witnessed it.

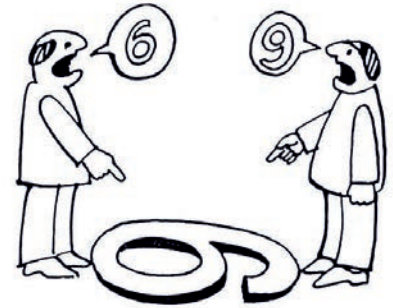
She didn’t have to forgive him. Forgiveness is never an expectation of a Circle. But she did forgive him, and they repaired their friendship in that circle and started spending more time together as friends.

The Circle likely wouldn’t have gone the same way had it been hosted only by adult staff at the school. It’s the peer leaders who help to set the tone, and they’re able to create that container for young people to just arrive and be who they are.



EMBRACE CONTRADICTIONS & PARADOXES

In Circle, each person is invited to share their story and perspective. Each perspective is like a piece of a puzzle, and only by collecting each story and putting them together can we collectively see the whole picture. Often, there may be contradictory perspectives that come up within a circle. In a Western worldview, a contradiction is often treated as an opportunity to prove an objective truth, rendering one perspective right and others wrong. Many Indigenous perspectives of Turtle Island, as well as many Eastern Philosophies, embrace contradiction or paradox as an inherent aspect of our world. By embracing this, we can gain a richer understanding as well as practice humility when a difference in perspective leads us to admit that there is much that we as humans still do not know.



OUR EXPERIENCE

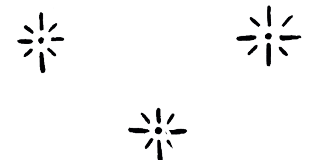
Here are some examples of paradoxes and contradictions that Pa'lante has embraced in our work:

1. PRACTICING CIRCLE WITHIN AN INSTITUTION

Bringing Circle into an institution, such as schools, comes with inherent contradiction. Schools, especially in communities of color, are historically rooted in colonial projects designed to control young people and train them for their subjugated position in the social order. This is to say that schools are generally invested in maintaining existing power structures.

Circle operates from an entirely different paradigm. Each person has as much right as each other to exercise their individual power within a circle. What does it mean to invite students to participate in a space rooted in equality and horizontal power, and then send them back into the stark hierarchy of the rest of the school once a circle is completed? Can a circle truly be a space of shared power if its structure and values are only held temporarily?

We continue to wrestle with this question that perhaps has no clear answer. What we feel is true is that Circle has the power to transform, and even if that transformation happens slowly over time, we believe in its potential. We also believe in the humanity of all people who are inside of school systems - no matter where they fall on the hierarchy. Principals are human, teachers are human, students are human. Circle gives us an opportunity, however briefly, to be human together, even in a dehumanizing setting. These moments felt worth it to us, even if it meant having to find ways to protect students (and teachers) from retaliation and other impacts of the traditional school system.



The system is not made for us. It's not made for us to succeed.

— Christopher "Domi" Lora, alum and staff member



2. DISRUPTING POWER WHILE CENTERING HUMANITY

We believe that practicing Circle with integrity necessarily involves an analysis of power and a commitment to disrupting oppressive power dynamics. Circle needs to be a place where we openly acknowledge the ways that race, gender, class, ability shape our lives and either resource or disenfranchise our communities and individual lives. We also believe that each person has a right to show up to a circle with their full expression of themselves, including their emotions, their beliefs, and their story. In some social justice spaces, white people, men, settlers, or other people who are privileged based on their position or identity are taught to get quieter in order to make more space for those who do not hold the same position of power. In many cases, this practice makes sense. However, as Circle teaches us to respect other human beings while also being in our own power, we learn to not overpower or be overpowered, but to really share in each other's humanity.

3. YOUTH LEADERSHIP VS LETTING "KIDS BE KIDS"

As explained in the last section, youth leadership is a core value of Pa'lante on every level. However, we also know that many youth - and especially youth of color - are treated like adults much sooner than they should be and are forced to grow up faster. From caring for siblings, cousins, their own children, or taking care of themselves without parental support, there are many scenarios where teenagers of color take on more responsibility than their more resourced white counterparts. At the same time, because of adultism, youth are often told, "You can't understand this because you're too young, or you're not educated enough to know what it's like."

We try to find the balance of creating authentic leadership opportunities, but also creating space for young people to get to experience their youth. This sometimes means offering enough support so that aspects of the program

don't need to be their responsibility. This also means employing enough adults so that youth have enough people to turn to if they need to support.

Centering the work around youth can be hard, right? Because the youth have school for the majority of the day. They also have lives.

They're still developing and still exploring, like 'I gotta make sure I pass my math test' and we're like, 'We gotta get a grant.'

— Christopher “Domi” Lora

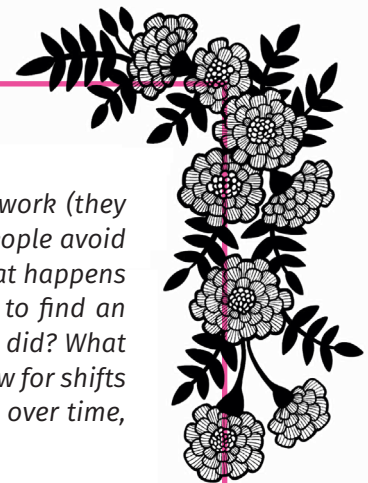
While we believe in building skills like fundraising, facilitation, financial and budgetary literacy so that young people can be in the lead, we also know that in more resourced communities, youth are not tasked with those same responsibilities for their youth programs.

At the end of the day, the youth should not have to carry the program, and the weight of the world all the time. We say, “Yes, out in the world, you may have to be an adult, but right here, you can just be you.” In Pa'lante, we try to always ask: how do we support young people to be drivers of the organization without resting too much upon their shoulders?



MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Reflect on what contradictions or paradoxes you have noticed in your work (they may be some of the ones we've listed, or they may be different). Many people avoid contradiction and argue for one true way or method of doing things. What happens if you allow opposing truths to exist at the same time? Is there a way to find an approach that embraces a balance? How might your work change if you did? What is the right speed or pace to support the youth? We encourage you to allow for shifts and changes over time as well. If we continue asking the same question over time, the answers we find may also change.



START SMALL

OUR EXPERIENCE (AND OUR MISTAKES!)

Work to transform schools has to be done on every level of the institution. Knowing this, Pa'lante originally set out to not only create a strong youth-led program, but we also worked closely with school administrators, teachers and staff. We developed a school-wide School Climate Committee that coordinated school staff to work in several areas: teacher professional development, student equity and access issues, and developing a circle-based equity driven advisory program.

When we first started, we decided to first prioritize bringing Circle to our school's advisory program. We thought it would be a good idea to introduce Circle in a community building context, rather than as something we just do when there is a problem or conflict. We trained over 100 teachers and staff at Holyoke High in Circle practice and created Circle-based plans for advisory each week, many of which touched on social-emotional and social justice-related themes.

Sounds like a good idea, right? Wrong! It was a huge failure!

Turns out that relying on people who are new to Circle, some of whom are resistant to it, to

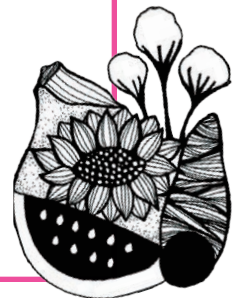
implement it with young people is not a recipe for success. Turns out trying to get 100 adults to do something, when they have been in the schools forever, and have been given new initiatives every year was difficult. Turns out students got a bad taste in their mouth about Circle because it was done poorly.

Some teachers loved it and loved our plans and their students loved it, too. Some people were kind of trying it. However, a lot of teachers were not comfortable with it and some didn't even try to implement our plans. Many students ended up really disliking advisory and thought Circle was cheesy. We did that for our first two years.

We soon found we did not have the capacity to lead work on every level of the school in meaningful ways, and we had to prioritize. We looked at where we were having the most impact, and it was clear that it was our work building youth leaders. Over time we shifted our approach away from trying to shift school culture through a mandatory curriculum that every teacher needed to get on board with. Instead, we made all of our offerings voluntary. We tried to create pockets of transformation/liberation in the school and grow from there. Our hope was that over time, students and staff alike would see that something beautiful and exciting was happening and would be naturally drawn to our work.

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Take some time to create a vision for what your program could look like. Then, map out what capacity you have, including staff time, student time, and resources. Does the capacity match the vision? If not, try to get at the core of your vision. Find a small way to get started that you know you can find success. Think about it this way: You wouldn't start a farm before you knew that you could successfully manage a garden bed. So, you start with your garden bed. Tend to it well. Learn about what conditions make for healthy growth. Apply this principle to your program: a small, mighty, well-tended program will have a great positive impact. A program that is bigger than the capacity and resources available won't be able to sustain its impact for long. Grow slowly over time and keep refining and adapting year-to-year to find the best approach for your context.



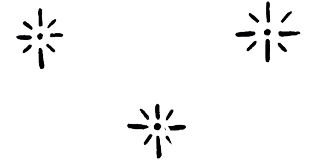
WALK THE TALK

OUR EXPERIENCE

It is helpful to remember that Circle is an ongoing practice, not a tool that we pull out when we are already in crisis or conflict. There is no book to learn Circle (be wary of books that say they will teach you!). There are no study sessions. The only way you learn is by doing. If we think of other things that might be considered a “practice” like meditation or prayer, it’s clear that the power of it comes not from engaging in the practice sporadically, but in doing it regularly and with intention. The purpose of Circle is not so much the outcome of a particular circle, but rather to transform and deepen our relationships to each other and ourselves, and to invite a more connected way of thinking and being in the world.

We believe that if we want to host circles for others, we have to be willing to engage in the process ourselves. We have to authentically make it a part of our own lives. Pa’lante peer leaders, and Pa’lante staff sit in Circle internally regularly to support one another, to celebrate, to mark transitions, to say goodbye, to hold each other accountable, and to build community. We also bring Circle to our families and communities.

We believe that the more we practice being in Circle in a formal way, the more that we internalize the teachings of Circle to guide us in our everyday ways of being. Peer Leaders have reported the teachings of Circle helping them with family conflicts, how they show up with teachers in their school, and how they feel internally about themselves.



Practice to me means that there’s always something new to learn, that you never stop learning. You’re not going to be an expert. At the end of the day... there’s more for me to grow and more for me to learn, and for years to come.

— Sierra Stewart, alum and former staff member

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Find ways to incorporate Circle into your everyday organizational practices. Can Circle help bring people together? Connect? Resolve problems collaboratively? Can Circle become part of your everyday? How will you check in with yourself and see if you are staying in integrity?



BE OPEN TO THE EXPERIMENT

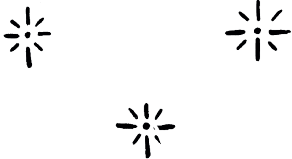
OUR EXPERIENCE

In the long history of the earth, humanity itself is in its infancy. And in human history, the fields of restorative and transformative justice are in their infancy. There is so much that we don't yet know about these practices. There is so much learning still to come - and we hope that you will be a part of it!

In this work, it is important to remain humble to all that we do not know. It is also important to be willing to experiment, try new things, take chances, to make mistakes, and to course-correct. Pa'lante has had many successes, and has also had many stumbles. We have tried projects and initiatives that didn't end up making much sense for our context, and have had to scrap them and try again. We are still in a process of figuring out how Pa'lante can best serve the community of Holyoke. We believe that being open to the experiment of it all and being willing to admit when something isn't working gives us space to be creative and to try again.

Every year has to change. It changes because there's a whole new cohort of youth each year and they bring so many different things to the table. And every year, young people are changing. Generations are changing, so there's no one recipe that's going to work for every place and every time.

Ofentimes it can be such a struggle to get circle and/or restorative/transformative justice in the room at all, that we can feel enormous pressure to prove that it's working. Funders, school leaders, and others with decision-making power often turn to restorative justice only when there is already significant damage done to a community and then want to see immediate results. It's a long road to build strong cultures and strong communities. The more that we can be honest about that, the more we can maintain integrity and alignment even if things don't work out the way we expect them to.



"I always am in awe of when we start out in the beginning of the year with no idea what we're gonna get into... We then slowly figure it out, what the issues are in the community, and then turn them into a whole project, seeing how it takes shape and form. We can start off a conversation with 'everybody hates lunch in the schools' and then we're adding a whole new display of 'Hidden Legends' on the way to the cafeteria, and now it's on Main Street. At the end of the year, everybody in the city can be in appreciation of people who have already been doing [organizing] work. It's just so dynamic."

— Sierra Stewart, alum and former staff member

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Find ways to be creative for your own context. Respond to what young people actually want to do. Find ways to validate the longevity of the work to allow for a change in programming or method (or for a program to end so that something new can sprout in its place). Always be reading and learning from others.



Check out these highlights from an article by former Pa'lante staff member Dani O'Brien and long-time Pa'lante supporter, Kysa Nygreen.



ASKING CRITICAL QUESTIONS

BY DANI O'BRIEN AND KYSA NYGREEN

For scholars who are committed to advancing RJ as a tool of racial justice in schools, we believe it is essential to ask critical questions, interrogate the punitive cultural logic of schooling as the backdrop for RJ interventions, and not assume that RJ values and aims are being lived just because RJ language has been adopted. We must avoid the temptation to dismiss or minimize underlying paradigmatic contradictions between RJ and punitive commonsense out of a desire to tell a positive or inspirational story about RJ's promise. Instead, we must be willing to name and engage the contradictions.

To do this, we must ask questions that point us toward restorative values and aims such as healing, wholeness, humanization, and social transformation. Questions like, "Does the use of RJ reduce suspension rates at the school?" do not support the transformative work we are talking about. Instead, we propose three critical questions to guide scholarship, action, and activism on RJ in schools. Attending to these questions does not guarantee RJ will be free of co-optation; however, it can help us understand, think about, and reflect on how we might move closer to transformation and racial justice.

1. WHO OR WHAT IS EXPECTED TO CHANGE?

This first question speaks to the short- and long-term goals of RJ in a particular setting. Examining how those in positions of power understand and espouse the aims of RJ, paying particular attention to how those aims may differ from those on the receiving end of RJ policy, can help illuminate potential contradictions and vulnerabilities. Is RJ attempting to change the behavior of individual students to better fit within the structure of schooling, or is it being implemented to change schooling itself—school culture, relationships, pedagogy, assessments? Is RJ being reduced to a tool or protocol, or is it understood as a set of values that are infused into every aspect of school culture? If RJ is being implemented with the explicit or implicit goal of changing students to fit the school, rather than the other way around, it is a call for action to educate those in positions of power about the values and aims of RJ, especially the short- and long-term goals of community and social change.

2. HOW IS INJUSTICE, ESPECIALLY RACISM, UNDERSTOOD AND ADDRESSED?

This question examines how injustice, and in particular racism, is being understood and addressed in the contexts into which RJ is introduced. The critical RJ paradigm described in this article holds that conflict emerges from unmet needs and, additionally, that structures of oppression, including racism, are inherently a source of conflict. In this paradigm, conflict and harm are located in unjust systems, not individuals. With its focus on healing and repairing harm, RJ requires those implementing it to address injustice and oppression that marginalized groups experience such as racism, classism, sexism, and colonialism (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Reflecting these assumptions, research and action for RJ in schools should examine how those implementing RJ understand the relationship between systemic oppression and conflict.

We also must consider how the indigenous roots of RJ are being honored, and in the context of

North American schools if and how topics such as colonization, settler colonialism, and indigenous resistance are being taught. If they are not, it is a call for action to educate about core assumptions and values of the critical restorative paradigm, its indigenous roots, and the historical and ongoing injustices of racism, colonization, and settler colonialism.

3. HOW ARE THE VALUES OF RJ TAKEN UP INSTITUTIONALLY?

This question addresses the distinction between RJ as a tool versus a paradigm. As discussed previously, RJ cannot be reduced to a disciplinary method or tool of behavioral control, but rather, must be viewed as a set of values to be infused into the entire school culture. This includes, but is not limited to,

questions of pedagogy, curriculum, evaluation, teacher professional development, physical space, governance, and decision-making. With this in mind, it becomes imperative that as we implement, advocate for, and research RJ in schools, we must attend to the ways its values are or are not being taken up. Are school administrators and teachers engaging in explicitly anti-racist anti-oppressive work? Are there institutionalized practices for school personnel to reflect on their own identities and biases? Is the curriculum culturally sustaining? Are, as circle process practitioner and trainer Dr. Sayra Pinto calls for, those implementing RJ engaging in “thoughtful, meaningful, challenging and difficult conversations

about race, oppression, privilege, and power” (Pinto, n.d.)? Are school leaders and teachers challenging practices and policies that reinforce inequity, such as high-stakes standardized testing, tracking, and other methods that are used to sort and separate students? Do teachers, administrators, and students share power or does the school have a hierarchical power structure that limits who has a voice? If the answer is no, it is a call for action to educate teachers and administrators about RJ as a paradigm that is explicit in its commitments to challenging injustice and fostering democracy. Work must be done to support schools in transforming their school culture so that RJ lives and breathes throughout the school, such that the punitive commonsense is replaced with a healing impulse that manifests in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and all other aspects of schooling.

O'Brien, D., & Nygreen, K. (2020). *Advancing restorative justice in the context of racial neoliberalism: Engaging contradictions to build humanizing spaces*. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 53(4), 518–530. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2020.1791768>.

For free access to the full article, please email Dani.obrien.dani@gmail.com.

NUTS AND BOLTS

For the purpose of this book, this section will focus on how Pa'lante operated while we were based in a public school context, which we hope will be useful for those working in schools as well as those working in other contexts. For more information about Pa'lante's structure as a community-based organization, refer to our "What's Next" Section.

- **Program/organizational structure**
- **How referrals work**
- **Preparing to host a circle**
- **Youth Participatory Action Research**
- **Leadership development**



PROGRAM / ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

At the heart of Pa'lante is always a group of about 25 high school student leaders (called Peer Leaders) who attend a one week intensive summer program in August and then meet weekly throughout the year. This group participates in extensive political education and community building, training in Circle Practice, restorative/transformative justice and YPAR/organizing. We have always had at least one adult staff member who coordinates this group, with other staff members rotating as facilitators.

Just as a circle has no beginning and no end, Pa'lante's year is structured through an overlapping ending and beginning. New Peer Leaders join the program as we say goodbye to graduating seniors. We mark this transition through a Celebration Circle at the end of a school year.

HOW REFERRALS WORK

When Pa'lante was housed in Holyoke High School, we received referrals from administration, teachers, and students. Anyone could refer a situation to Pa'lante, either through an online google form (see Appendix A), or by talking to a staff member (who then filled out the form to keep all the info in one place). Situations like fights, student-to-student or student-to-teacher conflict, bullying, bringing weapons to school, stealing, chronic absenteeism, and other situations that would historically be referred to the dean or principal could be referred to Pa'lante instead. Once a referral was made, a staff member would follow up with the person who referred it to understand more about the situation and decide if it would be a good fit for Pa'lante Peer Leaders to host a circle.



PREPARING TO HOST A CIRCLE

One Pa'lante staff member takes the lead on each case we receive (Please see Appendix C for detailed instructions on preparing a circle). The first step is to determine if the situation is a good fit. That staff lead talks briefly to everyone involved, usually starting with the person who made the referral, and then moving on to key players in the situation. (See Appendix B for guidance on what to cover in these conversations). At any point, staff may decide that the situation is not a good fit for Circle. When this happens, it is usually because either one or more people do not want to participate, or it is clear that one or more people are not yet in a place to participate in a constructive way. It is never a good idea to force a circle if potential participants don't want to or aren't ready.

Adults can, however, support and encourage young people to move forward in the Circle by taking time to understand and address fears and hesitations. Deep listening and understanding of where the young person is coming from is the first step. Even though we believe in the power of circle, we try to stay open to the fact that it really may or may not be a good idea. Once we have listened deeply, we may ask permission to explore another point of view. "I hear you that you're pretty sure a circle won't help. Is there any tiny part of you that thinks it might? Could you tell me what percent of you thinks it's a good idea and what percent of you thinks it's a bad idea? Can we explore that tiny part of you that thinks it might help?" Asking "what if" questions can also be helpful (eg: "what if the Circle were able to resolve it?" "What if you don't do a Circle and still have to face them in class next week?" "What would it feel like if this was actually put behind you?"). These kinds of questions can help students think through their fears and explore different outcomes.



There's always someone that tries to fall off and be left behind, or who moves a little slower. Just keep pushing them, because most of the time, they need that extra support. They might not have someone at home or in their life that can give them that extra push.

— Alexy Bernard, alum and staff member

It's not like there's an outline for circle...It's all about the intentions you put into it.

— Christopher "Domi" Lora, alum and staff member

If youth consent to a circle, the lead staff member will then draft up a circle plan (See Appendix D & E for examples) and meet with 1-2 peer leaders to go over the plan and decide who will take the lead on which parts of the plan. If this is a Peer Leader's first time hosting a circle, they may just take one simple part. For more experienced students, we often encourage them to host the majority of the circle.



Sometimes there's situations that you wouldn't expect a circle to be needed, but those are the circles that have the most impact that you wouldn't expect. Like support circles, for example. A lot of people are like, 'Oh, I don't want support.' But once they go in, they're like, 'You know, this felt good.' It's the aspect of practicing Circle, but it's also the fact that you don't always know that you need a circle until you sit in there and you're practicing it.

A lot of peer leaders come into the program thinking that they're helping other people who have 'all these problems,' and inadvertently end up helping themselves. They start to realize, 'Oh, I have problems too, and I can apply these same things that I'm learning in Pa'lante to my own life...I can ask for a circle for myself.' A lot of our students do ask for circles for themselves, and I think that's also the most powerful thing when someone who's used to holding the space gets to be a participant in this space.

Sometimes I've been in an accountability circle that wasn't for me, and I am still learning something for myself. So even to this day, I'm still learning. I'm still practicing.

— Cristopher "Domi" Lora, '18

At the end of a circle, there are often agreements made. It is important to write down the agreements somewhere, decide who needs to know about the agreements (for example, teachers, family members, school administrators, peers), and then share the agreements with those identified people. Youth often don't have much say over who their information is shared with in a school, and this is a time when every effort should be made to respect their wishes and maintain confidentiality and privacy whenever possible.

For more guidance on hosting circle, we recommend reading more of Sayra Pinto's writings at <https://lovingfuture.org>:



[Peacemaking
Circles Model](#)



[Mechanics
of a Circle](#)

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (YPAR)

To see examples of YPAR Pa'lante has done in the past, visit the "What We Do - Youth Organizing" Section.

Conducting a YPAR Project involves 6 phases. Generally, we try to complete all 6 phases within an academic year, though sometimes one project may take multiple years to complete.



PHASE 1: IDENTIFY A PROBLEM

In this phase, young people are encouraged to think about a problem that impacts them and their community. This should be a problem that they feel passionate about changing.

We use an activity called "Tell Em Why You're Mad" (See Appendix I) developed by one of Pa'lante's Co-founders, Dani O'Brien. This activity was inspired by a local radio station that had a segment called "Tell Em Why You're Mad" where listeners can call in and vent about something they're mad about. We take the same concept and invite peer leaders to think of issues that make them mad. We frame the activity by explaining that sometimes the things that make us most angry are due to injustice, and that our anger can be like a

compass that can direct us to the places that most need change.

Once we've created a list of issues that make us mad, we talk through what different projects could look like. Then we "vote with our feet" and create groups that are excited about each topic. Those groups then get to make their case about why their topic should be the one we focus on.

The next step is to build consensus around one topic. At this point, we may return to Circle and give everyone a chance to share their thoughts and feelings. Sometimes this part can take more than one meeting to ensure that all perspectives are heard and everyone feels positively about the choice of topic.

PHASE 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The next phase of the YPAR project is the literature review. The purpose of this phase is multipronged: to ground our research within a longer lineage of inquiry; to ensure that we are not “recreating the wheel”; to support peer leaders in developing research literacy and critical thinking.

The adult facilitator will pull articles that are relevant to the chosen research project. We then break up into groups to read and discuss an article, then teach that article back to the group. We will record any pertinent statistics or findings, as well as themes across multiple articles that help inform our research moving forward.

PHASE 3: RESEARCH

The next step is to design a research project. There are many methods to conduct research, including surveys, interviews, focus groups, photovoice.

Depending on what the issue is, different approaches will make more sense than others. It is also possible that a “mixed methods approach,” which employs multiple research methods, will be most useful.

The facilitator will go through different options and what they are most useful for, and the group decides together which method to use.

Once a method is chosen, it is time to design the research process. This may include drafting questions, identifying research participants, scheduling interviews, deciding how a survey will be administered, and all other details related to conducting the research.

PHASE 4: REVIEWING RESEARCH & DEVELOPING ACTION PLAN

Once data is collected, the group reviews the findings and analyzes them for key findings. Based on the findings, the group will brainstorm different forms of action that can be taken to make positive change. The group will then choose which action(s) they’d like to take and begin planning the action. Actions can include: speaking at school committee, organizing a protest, organizing a social media campaign, sharing research to school leaders, and more.

PHASE 5: TAKING ACTION

Once it’s decided what action the group wants to take, the next phase is devoted to that action. In this phase, peer leaders may be spending time writing speeches, making signs, creating messaging, recruiting other youth to be involved, or other work to make the action happen.

PHASE 6: REFLECTION

The final phase of the YPAR project is reflection. We take time in Circle to reflect on all aspects of the YPAR project, including: what went well in the process, what could have been improved, how did we handle difficult moments or conflict together, was our action successful in making change, if not - why not and what could we have done differently?





LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

We strive to place as much emphasis on caring for each other within our program as we do on supporting those outside of the program and on community organizing efforts. This is reflected in the way we run our meetings -- leaving generous time for mutual support -- as well as in our program structure more broadly. Each adult staff member closely mentors a small cohort of Peer Leaders, building trusting relationships and providing intensive support to ensure that each student stays on track academically and has the needed resources to deal with life's challenges.

Pa'lante's programming is strategically designed on a cascading mentorship/ leadership development model that meets each young person where they are, and then provides support and intensive mentorship to bring their leadership to the next level. The model begins with youth who participate in Pa'lante programming, but aren't necessarily part of the Peer Leadership program. These youth may have participated in a circle or attended a drop-in space or event. Peer Leaders offer mentorship and guidance to these young people. The next stage of the model is for youth to become peer leaders. Within the "peer leader" category, youth begin as "caterpillars" and

eventually grow into "butterflies." Each caterpillar has a butterfly mentor, and when they graduate into a butterfly, they will also receive a caterpillar mentee. Butterflies have the opportunity to apply to be youth staff, who have even greater responsibility within Pa'lante. Once youth graduate from high school or turn 19, they can return to the program as alumni fellows who help facilitate and coordinate programming.

Pa'lante Alumni Fellows are former PLs who have graduated or aged out of the program who become thoroughly integrated into our staff team. Where other youth organizations lose track of their members as they age out, Pa'lante seeks to maintain support, engagement and leadership of our alumni and presents a pathway to join our staff or pursue other educational/career goals.

Pa'lante offers several ways for alumni to continue to engage with the organization which include: participating in our monthly Alumni Circle; joining our Board of Directors (currently 60% youth and alum); and serving in our Alumni Fellowship Program (see below). They are 19-24 years old, and represent a similar diversity of identities as current peer leaders.

THE TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO COMMUNITY



When Pa'lante first started, our vision was to transform Holyoke High School. Over time, and after some successes and many defeats, we shifted our approach. Rather than try to drag teachers and administrators into doing things differently, we started talking about carving out pockets of liberation in an oppressive system. We put our attention and efforts on creating something so beautiful that more and more people would want to be part of it. When we reflect now, we see that it's a miracle that we created that for seven years. For those seven years, young people had this other experience in that building—in one area of the third floor they could come see and feel and experience that something else was possible. (See the History & Context section on page 4 for more about our history!).

We are heartbroken to no longer be working alongside Holyoke High School students in that building day in and day out. When you work in a school, you are right there in the trenches and there are so many opportunities to connect with young people, often when they need you most. It's easy to reach the young people who are most impacted by systemic oppression because they are the ones getting into trouble, skipping class etc. We always had more youth trying to access our support and opportunities than we had the capacity to work with. Now that we are community-based, for the first time we have to make an effort to recruit!!

Despite the new challenges, we also see the benefits of an after-school community space. More and more youth are showing up, and it's exciting to be able to offer them a beautiful space that is truly just for them. This transition has helped young people feel part of a community beyond their classroom. We'll hear them say, "My community is not just the school. This whole city is my community."



To be able to do this work, you need a village. We're in this together. We might get frustrated and we might disagree, but we're in this together.

— Sierra Stewart,
alum and staff member

Before, we were just impacting Holyoke High School, but now it's become so much bigger. We can dream. I think that's been beautiful.

— Christopher "Domi" Lora,
Alum and staff member



SOME OF OUR COMMUNITY-BASED OFFERINGS NOW INCLUDE:

The Meta Youth leaders named our new drop-in space “The Meta”, as a reference to the process of metamorphosis that butterflies (our mascot!) go through. We are open after school to all Holyoke youth ages 13-19 for drop-in support, restorative/transformative justice programming, leadership development, community organizing, and fair wage youth employment. For the first time, Pa'lante is able to offer resources, leadership development, community building, and organizing opportunities to youth not engaged in school, many of whom are at increased risk for both interpersonal and systemic violence.

Community-based Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) Historically, Pa'lante's YPAR and community organizing projects have been primarily focused on transforming issues within the Holyoke Public Schools. Now that we are community based, Pa'lante's YPAR projects have a broader focus by addressing city and state issues. At this writing, Peer Leaders are researching the past and present of policing in Holyoke.

Mindful Rage During the 2022-23 school year, Peer Leaders conducted their YPAR project around reimagining an approach to court-assigned “anger management.” Peer Leaders believed that traditional anger management didn't acknowledge the root causes of injustice in communities like Holyoke that contribute to youth's anger. They

researched and developed a curriculum that would acknowledge the legitimate reasons youth get angry and offer a culturally-relevant approach to supporting youth to channel that anger in ways that benefit them and their communities. They designed and piloted a six-week series of workshops inspired by the work of artists and activists who use their anger to create transformational change! Through this project, youth and staff also laid the groundwork to receive referrals to divert youth out of the criminal legal system and into Pa'lante's youth-led circles, leadership development, and community organizing opportunities. The goal is for the Mindful Rage Series to be approved to fulfill court mandated Anger Management requirements by 2025.

Circles for court-involved youth We are now developing partnerships in Holyoke to offer youth-led accountability, support and healing circles to youth involved in the criminal legal system.

Lighthouse Holyoke We are newly partnering with Lighthouse, an alternative high school in Holyoke that serves youth at the highest risk for drop out from Holyoke and the surrounding areas. Pa'lante now has a full time Restorative Justice Coordinator based at Lighthouse who is training staff and students to implement youth-led circles and restorative interventions there.



SHARED LEADERSHIP

Co-Executive Directors Alicia Thomas and Luke Midnight-Woodward

Pa'lante has a long history of shared leadership—both between youth and adults and between adult staff. Luke Woodward and Jerica Coffey laid the groundwork for Pa'lante in 2014, launched the first Peer Leader program in 2015 and co-led the work until Jerica left for personal reasons in 2017. Dani O'Brien, a PhD student at the time, had supported the work from the beginning and stepped in to co-lead with Luke after Jerica left. Romeo Romero Sigle began working with us in 2017, moving through various roles, helping to shape the work and then serving as Co-Director in 2021. Many more people have co-led this work—Chris Medina, Jo Kent Katz, Maria Cartagena, Danielle Hayes, Joel Arce, Jose Lugo, Betty Medina, to name a few. Pa'lante alums Katelynn Cruz, Aleyx Bernard, Bella Reeves, Christopher “Domi” Lora, TeeJae Reyes, Alina Torres, Tammy Vargas, Thaylianiz Garcia and Sierra Stewart led our work both as youth and as staff. Each of these individuals is incredible in their own right, but as we have come together it is our alchemy that brings the magic. Our leaders are life-long Holyokers, recent immigrants, Boricuas, Chicanos, Dominicans, antiracist white folks, non-zionist Jews, mixed folks, academics, organizers, historians, educators, queer and trans folks, elders and young people... we could go on and on.

While our leadership structure has taken various forms, Pa'lante have always functioned collaboratively, incorporating youth, board members and staff at all levels in decision making. In 2024, one year after we launched as an official 501c3 nonprofit, we moved to a co-Executive

Director model, with Alicia Thomas joining co-founder Luke Midnight-Woodward as Executive Director. Alicia, who is a Black woman with mixed ethnicity, was born and raised in Western MA and worked in the Holyoke Public Schools as an Ethnic Studies teacher until she was pushed out for supporting students to organize against a racist policy banning du-rags.

Our decision to move to a co-ED model was not only motivated by our commitment to shared leadership, but also by our commitment to leadership that reflects our young people and the community we are working in. We know that youth need to see themselves and their identities reflected in the organization's highest level of leadership, inspiring them to pursue their own goals within and outside the organization. We also know that the people who are most impacted by systemic oppression are in the best position to identify solutions. Given that Luke is white and not from Holyoke, we have been in ongoing conversations about how long it will make sense for him to be our Executive Director, and what a healthy transition will look like. We wanted to be intentional in avoiding pitfalls that often take place when nonprofits transition from white to POC leadership. After a lot of twists and turns, we landed on our current co-ED model, allowing plenty of time to transfer skills and “train up” Alicia, our incoming co-ED, with the goal of Luke eventually stepping down to make space for a new co-ED who shares more of the identities and life experiences of our youth.



CLOSING

Thank you for spending time with our work in this book. If you would like to continue following Pa'lante's journey, you can follow us on Instagram (@palante_tj) or visit our website (palanteholyoke.org). If this book has been helpful to you, consider making a donation at: palanteholyoke.org/donate.

In Pa'lante, we close all of our program meetings with the chant written by Assata Shakur, a political activist and ex-political prisoner who has spent her life fighting for black liberation. This chant has become a unifying rally cry amongst grassroots movements globally. We say it three times in Spanish and three times in English, as a call and response, getting louder each round. We invite you to sit with these words and let them guide you in your work.

It is our duty to fight for our freedom.

It is our duty to win.

We must love each other and support each other.

We have nothing to lose but our chains.

Es nuestro deber luchar por nuestra libertad.

Es nuestro deber vencer.

Debemos amarnos los unos a los otros y apoyarnos.

No tenemos nada que perder pero nuestras cadenas.

— Assata Shakur

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APPENDIX A: MISSION, VISION & VALUES

Our Mission

Rooted in Holyoke, Pa'lante builds youth power to heal and transform interpersonal harm and systemic injustices.

Our Vision

Pa'lante envisions a world where youth use their inherent power to create strong, healthy, intergenerational communities free from oppression and injustice.

Our Values

Youth Leadership: We believe in young people's inherent wisdom and power, and in their capacity to envision and create the conditions they need to thrive. We value intergenerational solidarity, sharing power, and supporting youth to lead in every aspect of the organization.

Healing: We strive to create a culture of healing and transformation for ourselves, our communities, our ancestors and future generations. We center accountability as we strive to repair, heal and transform both interpersonal and systemic harm.

Justice: We shift power to those most impacted by oppression, colonization, and the school to prison pipeline in our pursuit of justice. We uplift those pushed to the margins and address the root causes of suffering and harm in our communities.

Love: Love is at the heart of everything we do. Our work is driven by radical love for ourselves, our communities, and all young people. We center community care, authenticity, deep relationships, and a shared sense of belonging and home.

Honoring Native Languages: We honor our ancestors by speaking our native languages and embracing the history and culture they carry. We create accessible spaces that center marginalized languages, and encourage each other to offer translation and learn each others' languages.

Joy/Fun: We reclaim joy and playfulness in a world that so often demands suffering and productivity. We play, laugh, and celebrate with a purpose - to learn, to heal, and to celebrate together.

APPENDIX B: RESOURCE LIST

Websites & Articles

[For A Loving Future](#)- Dr. Sayra Pinto is Pa'lante's long-time mentor in Circle Practice and this website is a great place to start exploring her writings. We highly recommend reading the following sections: [Circle Process and Restorative Justice](#) , [Hosting Circles](#), [Circles and Cultural Appropriation](#)

[Transform Harm](#): resource hub created by Mariame Kaba. Strongly recommended!

[Just Practice](#) is a training and mentoring group focused on sustaining a community of practitioners that provide community-based accountability and support. Strongly recommended!

[Creative Interventions](#) provides vision, tools and resources to help anyone and everyone create community-based, collective responses to violence.

[Spring Up](#) offers Transformative Justice and TJ-adjacent rainings, coaching & resources.

Mia Mingus' [brief description of Transformative Justice](#)

[Bay Area Transformative Justice Collaborative](#)
Check out their Readings & Media section.

[Restorative Justice: What It Is and What It Isn't](#) by the editors of Rethinking Schools

[The Fictions and Futures of Transformative Justice](#)

[Baby Steps Toward Restorative Justice by Linea King](#)

[Leaving Evidence](#) blog by transformative justice and disability justice educator, Mia Mingus.

Video & Audio

[Pa'lante RJ Training Videos](#) covering Indigenous circle, program design & YPAR

[Students Lead the Way in Shifting Discipline at Holyoke High School](#) by Ben James NEPR piece about Pa'lante

[Introduction to Restorative Justice](#) by RJOY

[Re-entry Circle Video from Oakland Unified School District](#)

[Advisory Circle from Oakland Unified School District](#)

[Growing Fairness- Restorative Justice Documentary](#) by Teachers Unite - a bit dated now but still helpful for those bringing g RJ to schools.

RJ/TJ Books

[We Do This Til we Free Us](#) by Mariame Kaba

[Justice as Healing: Indigenous Ways](#), Edited by Wanda D. McCaslin

[Fumbling Towards Repair by Mariame Kaba and Shira Hassan](#) by [Ejeris Dixon](#) & [Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha](#)

[Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement](#)

[Saving Our Own Lives](#) by Shira Hassan

[Circle Forward: Building a Restorative School Community](#) by Carolyn Boyes Watson & Kay Pranis (Useful – many circle templates. Shouldn't be used without also developing a critique of cultural appropriation and the pitfalls of non tribal folks implementing circle).

RJ/TJ Books Continued...

Ending Child Sexual Abuse: A Transformative Justice Handbook- great resource on the differences between RJ and TJ and how these practices can be used to address serious harm (Also check out [Generation Five's website](#).)

We will not cancel us

Networks/Community Organizing

[Abolitionist Teaching Network](#)

[New England Youth Organizing Network](#)

[Dignity in Schools Campaign](#)

[Teachers Unite](#)

[Black Lives Matter at School](#)

Indigenous Critique of the West

[Fantasies of the Master Race Ward Churchill](#)

[Utopian Legacies John Mohawk](#)

[An Indigenous People's History of the United States](#) by Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz

[Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer](#)

[Red Pedagogy by Sandy Grande](#)

[Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking can Save the World](#) by Tyson Yunkaporta

RJ/TJ Adjacent Resources

[Hope and Healing in Urban Education](#) by Shawn Ginwright

[Growing Roses in Concrete TED Talk](#) by Jeff Duncan-Andrade

[We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom](#) by Bettina Love

[Teachers 4 Social Justice: 2020 Resources for Abolitionist Teaching and Solidarity in These Times](#) (by Teachers 4 Social Justice)

[When SEL is Used as Another Form of Policing](#) (Cierra Kaler-Jones)

[Guide for Racial Justice & Abolitionist Social and Emotional Learning](#) (Abolitionist Teaching Network)

[Teaching to Thrive: A Conversation with SEL Expert Rosalynne Duff About Racial Justice & SEL](#) (Abolitionist Teaching Network Podcast)

APPENDIX C: PA'LANTE LOGIC MODEL

Rooted in holyoke, pa'lante builds youth power to heal and transform interpersonal harm and systemic injustice.

Pa'lante envisions a world where youth use their inherent power to create strong, healthy, intergenerational communities free from oppression and injustice.

OUR RESOURCES	WHAT WE DO	WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE DEVELOP	YOUNG PEOPLE THRIVING
<p>Young members (ages 13 to 19) who live or hang out in Holyoke</p> <p>Peer Leaders and Mentors (ages 13 to 18) - 30 annually</p> <p>Staff team minimum 50% Pa'lante alum</p> <p>Board of Directors minimum 50% youth and Pa'lante alum</p> <p>Financial Resources: approx \$750,000 annually from individual donors, private foundations, state of MA, & earned revenue.</p> <p>Physical Space: 4500 sq ft, 3-story house within walking distance from Holyoke High School.</p> <p>Partnerships, Networks & Alliances</p> <p>Teachers in Circle Practice</p>	<p>Pa'lante employs a tiered youth leadership model rooted in indigenous Circle Practice as well as Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) and Positive Youth Development (PYD) shown to amplify social and emotional learning (SEL) and critical consciousness (Hello Insight 2022).</p> <p>Six Levels of Engagement with Growing Responsibility and Compensation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Member (ages 13 to 19; 200/year). Access to safe space, food, emotional support, and practical resources. Peer Leader (ages 13 to 19; 35/year; \$10/hr). Trained as circle keepers, restorative justice practitioners, community organizers, and public speakers. Peer Mentor (ages 13 to 19; 10/year; \$12.50/hr stipend) Take on increased responsibilities and assume mentorship roles for Peer Leaders. Youth Staff (ages 13 to 19; 5/year; \$15/hr) Paid 1-1 apprenticeship with Pa'lante staff, to increase role and leadership in the organization. Alumni (Ages 19-25). Monthly events and support circles (life skills and social support) open to all Pa'lante alumni. Alumni Staff include Fellows (\$18-20/hr) and other alumni staff (\$40k/yr+) who receive life coaching and a stipend for working on life goals. 	<p>Members Develop:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> A sense of belonging Life skills in areas of their own choosing. The desire to take on greater leadership roles within and beyond the organization. <p>Peer Leaders and Mentors Develop:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Critical consciousness, understanding systems of oppression, and mobilizing and advocating for themselves and their communities. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), including Positive Identity, Self-Management, Communication, and Social Skills A sense of contribution and commitment to their community. Social capital via support from adults and peers who love and support them and value their perspective. <p>Alumni and Young Staff Develop:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Greater SEL and critical consciousness Career and workforce development skills 	<p>Young Leaders and Mentors:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Experience well-being. Are fulfilled and successful academically or in career Engage civically & politically Continue to give back to their communities by leading and promoting wellness through Circle Practice in their communities. <p>Alumni:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to contribute to the success and health of Pa'lante Take action within their spheres of influence. Continue to develop in their professional and personal lives <p>Community:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced adultism & racism. Deeper understanding of BIPOC youth perspectives. More positive, hopeful, and energized. Has robust systems for healing and conflict resolution. Supports sustained youth-led organizing and action

OUR APPROACH

Pa'lante's tiered youth leadership model is rooted in indigenous Circle Practice, as well as research-based practices from Healing Centered Engagement and Positive Youth Development, known to enhance social and emotional learning and critical consciousness (Hello Insight 2022).

Our approach to Positive Youth Development prioritizes authentic engagement, rooted in love, justice and collective healing. We value intergenerational solidarity, sharing power, and supporting youth to lead in every aspect of the organization. In parallel, our Healing Centered Engagement approach (Ginwright, 2018) places community at the center of restoring well-being, rooted in culture and identity. We emphasize asset-driven strategies that celebrate young people's multiple identities, language practices, and cultures. Furthermore, we infuse joy and fun into learning and healing processes, recognizing their integral role in youth development.

These combined practices form a holistic framework that not only fosters social emotional learning and critical consciousness but also empowers young people to navigate challenges, build meaningful connections, and contribute positively to their communities.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Pa'lante's theory of change posits that implementing a tiered youth leadership model, which progressively increases responsibility and compensation for young people, and is supported by key research-based experiences in positive youth development, will facilitate the growth and development of participants. These experiences aim to cultivate a range of outcomes, starting from establishing safety and fostering a sense of belonging, then progressing to social and emotional learning, critical consciousness, leadership skills and social capacity. Over time, we anticipate that these skills will mutually reinforce each other, leading to improved life outcomes, enhanced career prospects, and better mental health and well-being for our members.

APPENDIX D: COMMITMENT PLEDGE

As a Pa'lante Transformative Justice Peer Leader I commit to:

1. Using circles in my own life when I need support and/or if someone in the program believes I need the support and asks me to participate.
2. Attending the Wednesday after school meetings from 3:00-5:00pm every week.
3. Communicating with a Coordinator and Director ahead of time to let them know if I cannot attend an after school meeting for a valid reason (illness, emergency, family commitment). If I exceed 5 or more programming meetings without communicating, I understand that I may be asked to step down from the program.
 - If I play a sport I will make arrangements with my coach so that I can attend Pa'lante meetings unless there is a game. If I need help communicating with my coach, I will ask a coordinator for help.
 - If I get or have a job, I will communicate with my employer that I am not available to work on Wednesday afternoons.
 - I will communicate ahead of time if I need to leave a meeting early. I will be paid only for the time I was at the meeting. If I leave early from a meeting without prior notice, I understand that I will not be paid for the meeting at all.
4. Supporting and participating in TJ related events such as presentations, educational programming and outreach activities.
5. Keeping personal information I hear from other students and/or adults confidential.
6. I understand that the Pa'lante space is sacred. I will not disrespect the circle, the talking piece or my peers within Pa'lante.
7. I will respect boundaries that have been established within Pa'lante and may establish different boundaries with peers outside of the Pa'lante space.
8. If I need to be on my phone, I will communicate with a staff member, in regards to why I need to be on my phone during programming.
9. Upholding the values of transformative justice wherever I am. As a Pa'lante Transformative Justice peer leader I will try to walk the talk in all aspects of my life. If this becomes challenging for me, I will ask for support from my peers, or from a Transformative Justice adult staff.
10. Learning about and fighting against all systems of injustice!

By signing this pledge I commit to items listed above.

Peer Leader Name: _____ Date: _____

Peer Leader Signature: _____

APPENDIX E:

ACCOUNTABILITY FOR PEER LEADERS

Expectations review from the Pa'lante Peer Leader Commitment Pledge:

1. Attending the Wednesday after school meetings from 3:00-5:00pm every week.
2. Communicating with the **Program Director** by 9am on Wednesday to let them know if I cannot attend an after school meeting for a valid reason (illness, emergency, family commitment).
 - If I play a sport I will make arrangements with my coach so that I can attend Pa'lante meetings unless there is a game. If I need help communicating with my coach, I will ask a Coordinator for help.
 - If I am not attending after-school meetings regularly, and not communicating about it, I understand that I may be asked to leave the program.
 - If I get or have a job, I will communicate with my employer that I am not available to work on Wednesday afternoons.
 - **NEW: I will communicate ahead of time if I need to leave a meeting early. I will be paid only for the time I was at the meeting if I am there over an hour. If I leave early from a meeting without prior notice, I understand that I will not be paid for the meeting at all.**

The accountability steps begin if a Peer Leader does one or more of the following:

- Repeatedly violates community norms in programming and/or during program transportation
- Misses two after school meetings without notifying a coordinator ahead of time
- Misses more than half of Wednesday meetings in a given month, including excused absences
- Leaves early from meetings more than half Wednesdays in a given month, including excused absences.
- Significant or ongoing discipline issue(s) at school

Accountability Steps

1. A coordinator has a one-on-one conversation with the peer leader to identify the concern and make an agreement to address it.
2. If any of these issues continue after the one-on-one conversation, and/or if a peer leader misses more than half of the after school meetings in a quarter, the peer leader can choose to a) agree to an accountability circle to make a plan to improve the situation or b) voluntarily leave the program.
3. If the peer leader actively participates in the accountability circle and follows the plan that was made during it within the agreed upon timeframe, they resume good standing in the program.
4. If the peer leader does not follow the plan agreed to during the circle, the peer leader will be asked to leave the program.
5. The group will offer a "transition circle" for any student leaving the program in order to appreciate their contributions.

APPENDIX F:

RJ REFERRAL FORM

Please complete this form as thoroughly as possible as this will support us in responding in a timely manner. Upon completing this referral form, you can expect to receive an email confirmation by the end of the next school day. Preparing for a restorative process requires extensive information gathering. Typically, the process of information gathering will take approximately one week.

Criteria: Please read before referring! If your referral falls under the following categories, please continue filling out this form.

1. Student-student conflict, especially involving violence or threats of violence (friends, romantic relationship)
2. Single significant discipline incident (ie weapon, violence, drugs, threats)
3. Student support for an acute issue (ie recent loss, major transition, family issue, recent traumatic incident)
4. Teacher-student conflict for a specific incident or issue
5. Any time a suspension involved, we can assist with re-entry

If your referral includes any of the following, it may not be a good fit for RJ:

1. Student is unwilling or not interested
2. Low level peer-peer conflict Long term support (ie chronic disengagement, depression, anxiety- these can be referred to Care Team)

Name (of referring person)

Your answer

Email

Your answer

Students Involved (name and grade)

Your answer

Is there anyone else we should reach out to?

Your answer

Does the student know that they are being referred to RJ? (We recommend letting them know!)

Yes

No

Other:

Does the student have an IEP or a 504 Plan?

Yes

No

Please describe in detail about the situation.

Your answer

What other interventions or supports, if any, have been attempted in the past?

Your answer

APPENDIX G: CIRCLE COORDINATION STEPS

1. Receive referral (verbal or electronic)
 - a. If it's verbal, enter a new referral through the google form
2. Follow up with referrer within 24 school day hours and set up a time to briefly discuss the referral in person or over the phone
3. Meet with referrer/Screen the issue
 - a. Learn about the situation
 - b. Assess whether RJ is the right fit. If not, screen out and help referrer connect with another resource (ie Teen Clinic, guidance, admin etc.)
 - c. Consider various tools: Circle, mini-circle, brief mediation
 - d. Arrive at an agreed upon approach with the referrer
 - e. Explain next steps
4. Start a list of everyone who might be in the circle. This will evolve as you prep each participant.
5. Prep each person for the circle. Meet with the person/people at the center of the issue first
 - a. See document titled "Circle Preparation Guidelines"
 - b. You may want to collect phone numbers so that once the circle is scheduled, you can inform participants via text
 - c. If student is suspended, do prep DURING suspension
6. Create a circle plan
 - a. Adapt from previous templates or Circle Forward book
 - b. Leave roles blank so you can fill in with peer leaders (PLs)
7. Schedule intervention
 - a. Attempt to schedule all circles within one week of the original referral, if not sooner
 - b. Attempt to schedule DURING suspension so that students miss less class; advocate for more in school suspensions rather than out of school. Get admin approval for this.
 - c. Review the schedules of all students involved and try to schedule during an elective vs core classes
 - d. Notify administration/referrer of the date and time
 - e. Inform all participants of the date and time
8. Peer leader prep
 - a. Select peer leaders based on the following
 - ii. Preference of participants in the circle (you can run names by them during their prep meetings)
 - iii. Good fit for the circle topic and participants
 - iv. Try to give all peer leaders opportunities to practice (don't rely on the same few peer leaders over and over)
 - v. Check to see which peer leaders are already involved in a circle this week
 - vi. Look at their schedules and figure out whether their schedule will work based on what class they would need to miss
 - b. Review the circle plan and assign roles

- c. PRACTICE each question with the peer leader and how the peer leader will lead the round
 - i. Coach them on what to share and how to answer the question
 - d. Give each peer leaders a pass that they need to have their teacher sign and bring back giving permission to participate
9. Teacher notification
- a. Send an email to the teachers who will have students miss their class with a list of students involved in the process
 - b. Collect permission forms from peer leaders
10. Day-of reminders
- a. Text all students involved in the circle the night before and/or morning of the circle to remind them
 - b. If you are concerned about students forgetting, call them in the class before the circle a couple minutes before the end and ask their teacher to send them to you at the end of class
11. Agreements
- a. During the circle, take notes on agreements made and who should be informed of those agreements
 - b. After the circle, type up agreements in the log.
 - c. Review your own role in upholding the agreements
 - i. Schedule a follow up circle if one was agreed to
 - ii. Schedule 1-1 follow up meetings if agreed upon
 - d. If other adults hold important pieces of the follow up, send an email to remind them of their role and ask to be kept informed of progress
12. Follow up circle
- a. Make sure to follow through on your commitments to follow up
 - b. Use existing templates but be sure to change check-in questions and adapt to fit the situation
 - c. Follow up circles may include the same group of people, or you may choose to have a smaller group

APPENDIX H:

CIRCLE PREPARATION MEETING GUIDELINES

General Guidelines

- Most preparation meetings should take about 10-15 minutes. You do not need to understand every detail of the situation. Keep the conversation focused.
- Be clear with potential participants that participation is voluntary, and that if they do not think they can participate in a positive way, they will be asked not to participate.

Initial meeting with referrer:

- Learn about the issue and determine if RJ is a good fit.
- Explain that RJ does not offer a quick fix; it may take multiple meetings. Are you willing to commit to this in an ongoing way?

Provide an overview of what to expect:

- We will spend time building trust at the beginning before getting into the issue and problem solving.
- We will use a talking piece to support us in listening and sharing. At no point in time will there be a “back-and-forth” where people are interrupting each other or shutting each other down.
- We will create shared agreements and a plan of support and expectations for follow-up. Most people wind up with some role in the follow up that goes beyond just the circle.
- If necessary, review the basic structure of a circle. This helps people feel comfortable walking into the process for the first time (talking piece, rounds, agreements, peer leader role etc.).

General guiding questions:

1. Please share as much as possible about the issue.
 - a. What happened?
 - b. What were you thinking at the time?
 - c. What can you own as your part in the problem or issue? This is critical in order for a circle to be effective. If you can't think of anything to take responsibility for, we may not be able to do the circle
 - d. Can you think of anything you could have done differently? This doesn't mean it's all your fault, but usually when we look back there are things we could improve on.
1. What is your biggest hope or the best possible outcome for this process?
2. Who else would you like to be in the circle with you? Think about someone who brings out the best in you, rather than a friend who takes your side even when you're off base.
3. Encourage a range of “types” of people: teachers, school admin, guidance counselor, family, friend, witness etc.
4. Can you listen to others who have a different perspective?
5. It is most helpful when we use “I” statements during the process and model vulnerability; Do you feel you can do this?

Preparation for teachers:

1. Are you willing to see the “good” in this student and support their efforts to change?
2. What are this student’s strengths? Are you willing to share this in the circle?
3. Are you willing to take responsibility for a piece of the issue in the circle? This is a key to success. We have found that when teachers model vulnerability and taking responsibility, students follow suit. It probably won’t go well if you are only able to focus on things the students has done wrong.

Preparation when there is conflict:

- What was your previous connection before the conflict began?
- Can you think of any positive qualities that you appreciate about the person?
- If the conflict is between friends: What are some positive qualities about this person that made you friends to begin with? Are you willing to share that in the circle?
- What is the best outcome you can imagine with this person? Are you open to being friends? Just being civil? What would you need in order to move on in a good way?
- What else do you need in order for this conflict to get resolved?
- What can you offer to help resolve the conflict? Usually it doesn’t get resolve just by one person, both people need to offer something. Is there anything you could take responsibility for or apologize for?

For reluctant participants

1. Try to assess whether the person is actually unable to participate in a good way, or whether they would benefit but have some concerns
 2. Do not pressure anyone to participate.
 3. If you believe they would benefit, ask permission to explore the issue further even though they are unsure. For example, “I hear you that you have some major concerns about participating. It’s definitely up to you to decide. Honestly, I still think it might be a good idea. I’m wondering if you’re willing to talk a little longer about the idea before you make up your mind.”
1. If you have permission, do share your perspective on why you think it is a good idea. Some reasons might include:
 - a. This situation has been going on a long time and is impacting you in these ways _____. I just don’t see how else you are going to get the resolution you say you want. Do you see other paths to resolution?
 - b. This is your opportunity to stick up for yourself with some support.
 - c. If you stand up and say the truth to this teacher/person, it could make a difference to other students.

APPENDIX I: CONFLICT CIRCLE TEMPLATE

Welcome & intentions: (*Insert name for who will lead this piece*)

- Come together to support _____ in resolving their conflict
- Create a plan and everyone knows their part

Opening (*Insert name here*)

We always start with an opening to set the tone. (read your opening) I picked this poem/quote because...

Logistics (*Insert name here*)

- **Talking piece:** In circle, we always use a talking piece. The way it works is pretty simple. When you have the talking piece, you are invited to speak. When you don't have it, you are invited to listen. We just ask that you respect the talking piece by not speaking when others have it. We always pass the talking piece to the left because it is closest to our heart. When the talking piece comes to you, hold it for a moment and see if you have anything you want to share. If you don't, feel free to pass the talking piece on to the next person. It is totally fine to pass AND if everyone passes we won't have a very helpful circle, so please be thoughtful and do your best to share.
- **Rounds:** The way we have a conversation in circle is that one of the hosts will ask a question. The host will answer the question first and then pass the talking piece to the left.
- **Timeframe:** We will try to end by the end of the block. If we need to go a few minutes over, is there anyone that wouldn't be able to do that?

Check-in (*Insert name here*)

- We always start with a check in to break the ice a little bit and to get to know each other. For today's check in round, please share your name, how you are connected to this situation, & how your best friend would describe you.

Agreements/Values (*Insert name here*)

- Hand out values etc
- Explain confidentiality
- Pass the talking piece: Can everyone agree to these guidelines? It is okay to say no, just let us know what your concern is so we can address it.

Guiding Questions

1. The fact that you are all here today says something about your commitment to solving the problem that brought us here. For this round, please share why you agreed to come to this circle when you were invited. (Insert name here)
2. Based on what you know, what is going on that led us to be here meeting today? It's okay if we each have a slightly different idea about what is going on. Just share from your perspective.
(Insert name here)
3. What has been the hardest part for YOU in this situation? (Insert name here)
4. Have you done anything to contribute to this problem? This is your chance to take responsibility, which will help us resolve the problem, so please dig deep! (Insert name here)
5. Creating agreements
(Insert name here -usually staff member because this part is more complicated)
 - a. Brainstorm round; what is needed to help the situation?
 - a. Summarize the plan and ask for agreement
 - a. What follow up is needed to make sure that this plan gets followed (write it down)?
 - a. Who else needs to know about this plan? (write it down)
6. If time: How will you know if this circle improved the situation? (Insert name here)

Check out

- What is one thing you learned or are taking away from this circle? (Insert name here)

Closing Quote/poem (*Insert name here*)

APPENDIX J: CELEBRATION CIRCLE TEMPLATE

Welcome and purpose: (Insert name for who will lead this piece)

- We are here to celebrate/make this rite of passage/transition...
- Everyone here has lots of other places they could be right now or things they could be doing. Thank you for taking the time to support and celebrate this special moment!

Opening: (Insert name)

“Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when [a person] is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long possessed that he is set free - he has set himself free - for higher dreams, for greater privileges.” – James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name

Check-in (Insert name)

- Why did you want to come today to celebrate _____?

Agreements/Values (Insert name)

What feels important in terms of the way you want to show up for today’s circle?

Guiding Questions

1. What are you most proud of for ____ from their last four years? How have you seen them grow? (Insert name)
2. How has ____ impacted you? Or, how are you different as a result of having worked with ____ ? (Insert name)
3. If time: Share about a time you took a big leap into a new level or responsibility or leadership. How did you feel? Were there any lessons learned? (Insert name)
4. If time: What do you imagine this might be like for _____, both positives and challenges? (Insert name)
5. What support might _____ need as they enter this next phase and what can you specifically offer to them moving forward? (Insert name)
6. (Do now or move to check out if short on time): What is your greatest hope or wish for ____ moving forward? (Insert name)

Check out: (Insert name)

What's one thing you are taking from this circle?

Closing: (Insert name)

Blessing of your work by John O'Donohue

May the light of your soul guide you.

May the light of your soul bless the work

You do with the secret love and warmth of your heart.

May you see in what you do the beauty of your own soul.

May the sacredness of your work bring healing, light and renewal to those

Who work with you and to those who see and receive your work.

May your work never weary you.

May it release within you wellsprings of refreshment, inspiration and excitement.

May you be present in what you do.

May you never become lost in the bland absences.

May the day never burden you.

May dawn find you awake and alert, approaching your new day with dreams,

Possibilities and promises.

May evening find you gracious and fulfilled.

May you go into the night blessed, sheltered and protected.

May your soul calm, console and renew you.

APPENDIX K:
AGREEMENTS FORM

Date of Intervention:

Type of Intervention:

<input type="checkbox"/> Restorative Dialogue	<input type="checkbox"/> Re-entry after suspension
<input type="checkbox"/> Support/Accountability Circle	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____

Participant Signatures

Brief description of issues/events leading to intervention:

Agreement reached:

Who should be informed about this agreement?

Follow up plan:

APPENDIX L:
TELL EM WHY YOU'RE MAD
(IDENTIFYING A YPAR TOPIC LESSON PLAN)

Created by Dani O'Brien for Pa'lante Transformative Justice

Materials

- Sticky notes (3 per person)
- Butcher paper
- Talking piece & Centerpiece for Circle

Objectives:

1. Explore problems in our community that make us angry
2. Identify themes or commonalities amongst the group
3. Begin brainstorming and narrowing down research topics

Framing:

As a group, if we are going to be trying to make changes at the school we first have to figure out what we want to change. One of the best ways to figure out what needs to change is to figure out what about the school makes us angry. Every important social justice movement (the end of slavery, women's right to vote, desegregation of schools, civil rights movement, etc.) was the result of anger. In all of those movements people took their anger and used it to fight for change. When people take their anger and work collectively to challenge injustice, that is how change happens.

Directions: Give each person 3 sticky notes and tell them to write down one thing about their school or community that makes them mad. It can be something that has happened to them personally or something they've seen happen to someone else. Invite participants to think broadly - it could be something about the way students treat students, teachers and students, curriculum, resources, rules. However, they should be as specific as possible. Facilitator should give an example that is true for them.

After everyone has filled out their sticky notes, do a round in Circle. When the talking piece comes, each person will post their three on a butcher paper and explain them. Tell students that if they think theirs is related to what another person has said to put it closer to that sticky note and if they think it is different put it farther away. In this way, you will begin creating clusters or themes that will help you in the process of narrowing down a topic later.

After the round is finished, invite group discussion to identify if there are any categories or themes emerging. Some examples of themes may be curriculum issues, unfair discipline, teacher-student relationships.

If time allows, sort the sticky notes into these themes - if time doesn't allow just write down all the themes that are emerging. Let students know that this is called **coding** and is part of the research process.

Once the data is coded into distinct themes or categories, you can use these categories to help decide on what research issue students are most passionate to focus on for their YPAR. Utilize Circle to start building consensus around one issue.



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