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plied funding to take SEI from a seasonal camp to a year-round program of wraparound services for at-risk youth and their families. By 1997, SEI had a physical headquarters and was expanding services to meet community needs as they arose.

Hopson understood from the beginning the fallacy of demonizing

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teens. He knew that disenfranchised adults struggled to provide safe home bases – and that crime is so often the result of a failure of resources. He also understood that in providing those resources, personal connection was essential.

“We’ve always centered our work on having the right kind of person,” Aldridge said. “We call them “superheroes” – coordinators, case managers, those people that do that work. We bring them to the center of places where people are struggling. A lot of the services that we provide here have a person where their job is to build a meaningful relationship with someone, and then use that relationship to help them get to a place where they can thrive, where their family can be restored, where they can have all of the things that they need.”

As SEI expanded, Hopson also prioritized the importance of showing youth and their families their options. Kids elementary school-aged and older could see, as Aldridge had, many diverse examples of prosperous Black adults. Through education programs at SEI, teens and their families learned of myriad paths open to them – and SEI helped demystify and remove barriers to those paths.

Hopson speaks fondly of successful SEI alums.

“We can talk about any number of individuals locally – the Rukaiyah Adams and Orlando Williams of the world, we could talk about the Nico Harrisons, the (general manager) for the Dallas Mavericks, we can talk about Ime Udoka, who’s the head coach for the Houston Rockets, Aaron Miles (assistant coach for the New Orleans Pel-

icans),” he said. “I take most pride in that, because that was the ultimate goal, to make sure that our kids, if given the opportunity and options, could be as successful as anyone else. After 40 years, we literally have thousands and thousands of kids that have gone through and are now positive contributing citizens in communities across this country.

So many of the staff members themselves are a testament to the program’s success.

“A young lady that I mentored when I first got here, she’s currently the director of our student and parents services – that’s the biggest component of our agency,” Aldridge said. “And so I was able to see her grow up into an incredible young woman, she went off to college, came back and then started as a case manager and worked her way up to this leadership role. To me, it’s like a full continuum: Not only do I get an opportunity to pour in, but that person can turn around and pour in somebody else who in turn pours into other people.”

Success Stories

Last year – Hopson’s last full year as CEO of SEI – the organization reported that 93% of SEI students graduated high school, compared to a 72% graduation rate for Black students county-wide and a 79% graduation rate for all students nationwide.

SEI bolstered so many of those grads by helping preserve and improve their households, awarding more than \$3.3 million in funding for energy assistance to Portland clients. The organization also provided short-term rental assistance to 1,517 households and supported more than 100 individuals who were grappling with domestic and sexual violence.

To date, since its founding, SEI has served more than 100,000 youths and families.

“Our big, audacious goal is to serve every Black resident,” Aldridge said. “And right now we serve roughly 17,000 folks a year, and there are 72,000 Black folks in the state of Oregon.”

It is harder to provide in-person services to Black Portlanders, who have been dispersed into different neighborhoods, counties and cities due to gentrification. But even in the last two years, Aldridge points out, SEI has grown in dramatic

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PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO

Free Apple Jam on Sauvie Island August 24

Metro Parks and Nature invites community members to Apple Jam on Saturday, August 24 from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. for a day of fun, family-friendly activities in the historic orchard of Howell Territorial Park on Sauvie Island. The park is located at 13901 NW Howell Park Road. Sign at <http://oregonmetro.gov/calendar>. Harvest apples, play games, see a cider press in action, and connect with others who are dedicated to reducing food waste and increasing access to resources like the park’s free orchard. Music, food, and harvest bags will be provided. There is no cost to attend and all are welcome.

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create an inclusive camp focused on “STEAMED” education: science, technology, engineering, art, math, environmental studies and design, an approach that integrates creative disciplines to aid in problem-solving.

From the beginning, the two wanted to establish more holistic programming.

“We launched ELSO with the simple mission to get more Black and Brown kids to see themselves represented in science and our hope is that by doing this, Black and Brown children will feel inspired, they’ll have their identity affirmed and they will be more curious about science and about learning science, because it’s more relevant to them and it’s been presented by somebody who’s approachable and who connects with them on more of a personal level,” Brown said.

Multifaceted Programming

Since 2015, ELSO has directly served more than 760 youth with curricula designed using what they call a “JEDI mindset”: a lens of justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. The program’s successes have not gone unnoticed: Earlier this year, ELSO Inc. was one of eight recipients of a Community Watershed Stewardship Program grant from the city of Portland.

In the summer, K-8 students can attend the four-week Wayfinders Summer Camp, with four different units that are each adjusted to the needs of four different age groups. The Dive In! unit familiarizes students with marine biology, partnering with Metro, the Oregon Zoo and I’m Hooked Inc. The Flow Ridin’ unit partners with ELSO’s Studio Justice program, Bacharach Construction and Lower Columbia Estuary to introduce students to the rivers and other waterways that shape their home city. With Into the Forest, partner organizations Metro, Friends of Tryon Creek and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service support learning about everything from forest ecology to

wildlife habitats and even urban ecosystems. Meanwhile, partner organizations Adidas, Nike, Intel, Project LEDO, the National Society of Black Engineers and the Bonneville Dam support the Wired Up! unit, which provides

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not only a crash-course in electrical and robotic engineering, but also shows how such disciplines can be applied outdoors and on a large scale with environmental engineering.

The monthlong program offers sliding scale fees ranging from \$150 to \$390.

That program wrapped up earlier this month, but ELSO programming continues throughout the year, with a four-day spring break camp. This year’s theme was Life Skillz, an energized and more culturally inclusive update to classic home ec themes: sewing, cooking, baking and home design.

For teens, ELSO offers paid afterschool programs through its Studio Justice arm. Last spring, BIPOC youth between the ages of 14 and 20 met weekly on Zoom for two months to learn and discuss “Designing Climate Justice.” The cohort completed the program by contributing their own redesigns of Prescott Elementary School, with a focus on integrating the school into nature and equipping it to provide climate education. In recognition of their time and effort – and to demonstrate the value of their work – students who completed the program were provided with a \$250 stipend.

Fostering Interest

Both Brown and Richardson cite George Washington Carver as a spiritual influence for the camp’s multifaceted mission.

“In his time, there was a need for some innovation to change the economy for his neighborhood, for his community,” Richardson, a behavior pharmacologist, said. “Everyone was faced with a problem of, what are we going to do if we can’t grow cotton? What are we going to do if the people who work the cotton are no longer doing that work? What are we going to do to turn over the soil, to keep it rich off-season? And George Washington Carver, in one week, he holed himself up in his lab and by the time he came out, there was a new market for something that was in abundance: peanuts. He made it so that not only was he enriching the soil, but he created a whole new product that could be sold, that created more money flow, that created more interest, that created more jobs – more palatable jobs – in his community. In my mind, that’s the type of work I want to do with ELSO. I want to look around in my community and think about, what can I do and how can I make things better? How can I make more opportunities?”

It is a camp designed to create a sense of belonging for marginalized children, teens and young adults – a safe space to foster innovation.

“We wanted to create an environment that kids could start to learn science early, and to start to debunk that notion that Black and Brown children aren’t scientists,” Brown said.

But ELSO isn’t just about training future researchers and engineers.

“You don’t have to be the best, the only or the first to enjoy science,” Richardson said. “If you’re creative and you’re enthusiastic, keep raising your hand in the classroom.”

For more information, visit <https://www.elsoincpx.org>.