

FEATURED STORIES

Shadae McDaniel Builds Bridges, Provides Opportunities for Youth Through the Power of Performance

Shadae McDaniel, Senior Vice President/Programs and Strategic Initiatives/Director, All Stars Project (ASP) of New Jersey, grew up in Teaneck, New Jersey, on the Black side of a largely Jewish community, with the love and support of her mother, a single parent and an immigrant. She recalls how dance served as an integral part of her life, not only during her formative years, beginning with joining the Teaneck Terpsichoreans – a dance troupe established in 1971 – but into adulthood.

by **D. Kevin McNeir**

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“I loved performing and getting on stage with others who initially were strangers but who quickly became my friends,” she said. “After high school, I moved on to Howard University – the Mecca of everything – and performed as part of the ‘Showtime’ Marching Band.

“At Howard, I learned what it means to perform in your community and what it means to be part of the global community. Even more, I realized that our existence is predicated on how we help others.”

McDaniel said her path had long been clear to her even before college and upon receiving a bachelor’s degree in health sciences from Howard, she returned home to New Jersey to pursue a master’s degree in social work at Rutgers University.

“I always knew I would be involved with a nonprofit organization – I just didn’t know what it would look like,” she said. “I started in health and schools and other community-based work that supported poor communities, black and brown. Then, in 2014, I met the All Stars.”

McDaniel finds her niche with All Stars Project of NJ

Ten years have passed since McDaniel was first introduced to ASP when she attended an All Stars Project of New Jersey (NJ) Afterschool Development conference in 2014. A year later, she was hired by the ASP of NJ as a Senior Program Manager; six months later she would be promoted to Director of Youth Programs. In 2020, she was named City Leader and in 2022, she became Director of the ASP of NJ and VP of Strategic Initiatives.

“When I met the All Stars, I saw an opportunity to do important work with black and brown communities – to support them and to change lives by working with people who do not look like us or come from our places and provide leadership, working with diverse leaders who want to give back to black and brown communities. It was a real paradigm shift,” McDaniel said.

“If you had asked me 10 years ago if I thought I would be doing so many incredible things – things that I’ve been supported and encouraged to do on behalf of the All Stars Project – I would have said ‘no way.’ We have been able to create a new narrative about belonging, partnering with those who I may not have agreed with or looked like but with whom we have had great success. Performance is what allowed it to happen – it has served as the ultimate bridge builder. The power of performance levels the playing field.

“Our children get locked into narrow, potentially dangerous roles early in life. We perform our lives and life is a stage. But all the roles have different scripts, different costumes and different settings. Far too often, our youth feel like life is something that is happening to them. They see opportunities that they believe are unavailable to them. But through All Stars, I have learned that when you give youth the chance to lean into what they can become, and let them pretend and play with it, it loosens the pressure and turns down the heat.

“Once you rehearse, when you get on stage, you can kill it. For the youth in our programs, we allow them to rehearse in corporate environments.”

With locations in New York, Newark, New Jersey, Chicago, Dallas and the San Francisco Bay Area, the mission of ASP is as follows: through the developmental power of performance, we transform the lives of youth from poor and underserved communities in partnership with caring adults, giving everyone the opportunity to grow.

According to its website, All Stars Project founders questioned many of the standard assumptions about learning and human development and has spent the last three decades creating both a practice and a science, putting them on the cutting edge of breakthroughs in these fields.

“We believe that development — the capacity of human beings to continuously create and recreate their lives — is necessary to re-initiate learning, For this reason, it is critical that we dedicate afterschool time to re-initiating and re-invigorating growth in young people’s lives – creating a more developmental future for our country and our world,” said ASP executives on their website.

The proof is in the pudding

As for McDaniel, she has played a pivotal role in the expansion of the DSY to Jersey City and the launch of Operation Conversation: Cops & Kids in partnership with Mayor Ras Baraka and the Newark Police Division. She also spearheaded ASP's partnership with Onyx Equities resulting in ASP of New Jersey's new Campus for Performance and Development at the Gateway Center.

"We're the only organization I know of that works with youth at high school age without professional criteria," she said. "As youth begin to perform in new ways in places where they've never been invited before or experienced, they begin to say, 'I can do that – I can go there.'"

"Since 1999, we have reached 35,000 youth in Newark and surrounding cities. We have supported over 1,500 youth in school programs and we're about to launch a DSY program in March to which more than 300 youth applied, expanding our efforts to Jersey City and surrounding cities.

"All Stars is more than just checking a box. All Stars cultivated my strengths and talents. I love Newark and I love New Jersey but we also have a responsibility to the nation. I am a beneficiary of what All Stars preaches. And I remain committed – we remain committed – to practicing what we preach," McDaniel said.
