JOURNEY TO EQUITY

20 FOOTPRINTS FROM YOUTHPRISE’S DECADE OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE (2011-2021)

“A JOURNEY IS CALLED THAT BECAUSE YOU CANNOT KNOW WHAT YOU WILL...DO WITH WHAT YOU FIND, OR WHAT YOU FIND WILL DO TO YOU.”

JAMES BALDWIN, AMERICAN WRITER AND ACTIVIST

James Toole, Ph.D.
Pamela Toole, Ph.D.
Gifty Amarteifio, Ph.D.

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Journey to Equity Research Team

James C. Toole, Ph.D. James is the Executive Director of Compass Institute, a Senior Fellow at the University of Minnesota’s School of Social Work and the College of Education and Human Development, and a Senior Consultant for the YMCA of the North’s Equity Innovation Center. Dr. Toole designed the Journey to Equity study, conducted and analyzed interviews, identified the 20 footprints, and wrote the final and condensed reports.

Pamela Toole, Ph.D. Pamela is the Vice-President of Compass Institute and a national educational consultant in the areas of group facilitation, service-learning, peer helping, and socio-emotional learning. Dr. Toole contributed to this report through conducting interviews and providing ideas, feedback and editing towards the final report.

Gifty Amarteifio, Ph.D. Gifty is a Sr. User Experience Research Lead at Travelers Insurance. Prior to this role, she was a Research and Evaluation Consultant and Member-Owner of TerraLuna Collaborative. Dr. Amarteifio played a crucial role in the Journey to Equity work, spearheading qualitative data analysis and providing invaluable support in shaping the project’s final deliverable.

Claire Dunlap, M.A. Claire serves as Youthprise’s Director of Organizational Effectiveness, leading and implementing strategies to advance Youthprise’s evaluation agenda. She managed the internal workings of the Journey to Equity report through coordinating and providing feedback on the interview questions, Community Engagement Assessment survey, and individual interview schedule.

Note

This report captures Youthprise’s history from its founding in 2011 until 2021. People are identified by their roles during that first decade of the organization’s history.
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**Introduction**

James Baldwin writes prophetically that: “A journey is called that because you cannot know what you will….do with what you find, or what you find will do to you.” While the plot of any trek revolves around the action, the story is driven not only by whether the protagonists will reach their destination, but by whether they can transcend some internal limitation. There is always both the outer journey and the inner journey. The heroic quest begins the minute someone leaves home to search for a greater good. Home might be a familiar physical place, a job, a mission, a belief, or a way of thinking about yourself or the world.

The McKnight Foundation created Youthprise in 2011 to start a fresh journey to equity. Imagine the challenge. You are given $5 million to start a new philanthropic organization to create equal opportunity so that all youth can thrive regardless of race, ethnicity or income. What would you call the organization? How would you spend that money? Who would you select to be board members? Who would you hire? What type of culture would you seek to build? What role might youth play? And, for a bit of humor and reality, whom would you be willing to antagonize?

In celebration of Youthprise’s 10th anniversary, a team of researchers from Saint Paul’s Compass Institute designed this study to document the organization’s history, and how it answered the above questions.

Instead of the usual organizational chronology, numbers of people served, or a long list of initiatives, this research presents 20 “footprints” that summarize the key steps Youthprise took on its journey to equity. The footprints collectively reveal how Youthprise sought to create fresh approaches to advance equity.

**Main Research Questions**

1. What is the journey that people and organizations take when they commit to disrupt the status quo and advance equity and inclusion?

2. What are the strategies on the journey that can ignite and guide real transformation?

3. How does the journey to equity not only affect communities, but the people doing the work?

The study used a mixed method, case study methodology. The quantitative data involved 33 Youthprise staff and board completing a Community Engagement Assessment. The qualitative data consisted of two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 17 stakeholders. Those interviewed included 12 staff members, three board members, a McKnight Foundation leader, and a network partner. The group spanned a wide range of ages, race/ethnicities, and backgrounds. All 40 plus hours of interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom, transcribed, and analyzed using the qualitative software MAXQDA.

**Study Goals**

1. To contribute to scholarly research about understanding the journey to equity.

2. To provide insights to those who perform similar work for navigating their own journey to equity.

3. To offer the Youthprise community, stakeholders, and friends an opportunity to meaningfully reflect, celebrate, and learn from the journey they have taken to reach this ten-year anniversary.
Setting the Foundation for the Journey to Equity (Footprints 1 to 5)

The journey begins only when someone is willing to take a risk

Select a leader that is a pioneer, not a settler

Be willing to start the journey without a map

Carry a compass and know your true north

Think like an entrepreneur
The first footprint on the journey to equity is courage. The McKnight Foundation made a series of brave decisions when founding Youthprise that contributed significantly to everything that followed for a decade.

The McKnight Foundation invested heavily for years to build up organizations that provided youth with after school and summer opportunities to augment their formal education. The Foundation played a central role not only in eventually funding 80 to 100 organizations on an annual basis, but in a larger way to help the out-of-school-time (OST) network emerge as a self-aware and cohesive field. That’s an uncommon and pivotal role for a foundation to play.

A willingness to go in new directions

Why would McKnight want to change a successful formula? While some within the foundation supported the status quo, others started to question whether that funding stream had hit a wall or plateau. While the organizations provided valuable developmental opportunities for individual youth, they did little to change the larger context of their lives. If you put a finger in the dike of social problems, it only works until the next and the next finger are needed. The foundation wondered what it could do to dispense with the need for a dike in the first place.

After exploring different options, the McKnight Foundation decided to shift its OST funding stream ($6 million at the time) to a new, community-based intermediary that would be formed to take over grant-giving. The new organization’s assumed advantages would be that it could be closer and more responsive to the community, more creative in how the funds might be used, and more free to engage in activities like policy advocacy that a foundation could not.

The decision carried risks. As McKnight Vice-President Neal Cuthbert confessed: “...you can’t just demonstrate systems change and entrepreneurial creative thinking out of the gate...We were going to have to wait for the organization to grow up to justify our decision.” Doing nothing, however, was not an option either. It was quite likely that if no changes were made, the funding stream would gradually disappear anyway.

Challenging the status quo

When people in the OST field called to complain about the foundation’s new direction, McKnight’s Cuthbert understood: “That’s a completely fair thing to be upset about...I couldn’t disagree with them. For some people in the OST field, we were taking a big risk with their money, is how they looked at it.” To manage that tension, Youthprise would need to convince the OST field of its value proposition—that expanding beyond the strict boundaries of exclusively funding OST organizations might ultimately benefit both youth and the OST field.
The second footprint on the journey to equity is finding a leader who is willing to venture off the beaten path. McKnight needed someone who would be creative, confident, and entrepreneurial enough to develop and test fresh ideas.

McKnight faced a monumental challenge when it created Youthprise. What kind of leader should it hire? A number of exceptional candidates applied that would have typically been obvious and logical choices to run a very good OST-focused intermediary. But as Cuthbert argued: “We really wanted was someone that was going to be successful in ways that we couldn’t yet imagine and didn’t know.”

Finding the right pioneer
McKnight found the right kind of talent in an unlikely candidate. Wokie Weah was not well known and experienced in the OST field, but her perspective was informed by being an immigrant from Liberia, a woman of color, and someone with a rich life and work resume. Weah herself shared how helpful that was.

“I have a very a deep understanding of how the world works when it’s chaotic, because of my experience in Liberia. So a lot of things that might bother some people don’t necessarily bother me. I’m used to chaos. We went through a war that was absolutely crazy. We lost so much. But I think that has been a strength for me, being able to lead in a way that I am not just reacting to everything that’s happening around me. Very, very few things bend me out of shape. I’m pretty measured in my responses.”

McKnight saw Weah’s background additionally helpful to more fully integrate the OST field, whose leadership at the time was not racially or ethnically diverse. Weah mirrored many of the youth that OST programs served. It was hoped that her presence might push the field further in addressing race and equity.

The excitement and cost of being a change agent
Weah proved to be not only comfortable “thinking about things in a different way and taking risks.” She relished it. That didn’t mean it was easy. As one staff member shared, there was a personal cost.

“We can end up looking at Youthprise’s positive end results, but may not always acknowledge her personal experience. Wokie didn’t step into a supportive and encouraging environment. In reality, some did not want her to succeed. People weren’t saying, ‘How can we help you?’ People were skeptical of her experience and her position as an outsider to the philanthropy field.”

Growing the organization’s leadership
Youthprise needed more than one strong leader to build the organization. Soon after its founding, Weah and Cuthbert interviewed a young, black man named Marcus Pope. They knew they wanted him:

“He was a kid at the time. He looked 14. We had to have him in the mix, because he was going to be the same kind of intellectual and analytic spark like Wokie. They would do things together that we couldn’t imagine.”

Footprint 2:
Select a leader who is a pioneer, not a settler

Insights
The journey to equity requires adventurous leaders.

Leaders: Who is selected to lead the journey to equity will be fateful.

Diversity: There is power in selecting leaders whose life experiences and appearances mirror the community.

Outsiders: Systems change may require leaders who are outsiders, and that bring divergent skills, perspectives, and histories.

Personal Cost: Leaders who are outsiders may be disparaged by those whose mindsets and skillsets are tied to the status quo.

Life Experiences: Leaders need to be strengthened by life experiences that allow them to withstand uncertainty and controversy.
The third footprint on the journey to equity is a willingness to begin without a clear idea about where you are going, or how you will get there. McKnight did not have a roadmap for the new organization, and it was not afraid to admit that. They were content to hire who they thought would be the right leaders, and give them the patience, trust, and resources to find their own way.

Youthprise faced no shortage of people who would have happily provided a map for what the organization would become. There were people on the McKnight board, the OST field, past grantees, other foundations, and the first Youthprise board who all had their own particular vision for what the organization should become.

**Giving people permission to follow their own path**

McKnight chose to place its trust in the new leaders. Cuthbert told Wokie and Marcus: “If you do what we would have done, you will have failed.” That comments might rank among the more humble ever coming from a foundation. Having such an open-ended agenda, however, might have intimidated lesser leaders. But when Cuthbert shared those thoughts with Marcus, he observed: “I could see that was like gas in his tank. He was like ‘This is really cool.’” Rather than lamenting not being given a road map for the journey to equity, Wokie and Marcus became energized by it.

**Creating something out of nothing**

Youthprise had to figure out both its organizational poetry and plumbing. The poetry challenge would require clarifying a mission, vision and set of initiatives that would inspire potential staff, community members, funders and partners to join its work. The plumbing challenge would require putting in place all of the necessary logistics to run an organization. It’s important to note that even the routine plumbing tasks can be complex on the journey to equity. Finding an office space was not just about architecture and price. It was also about identifying a place where both professionals and urban teenagers would feel welcome and comfortable. Developing a compensation plan was not just about tallying people’s college degrees and professional skillset. It was about how to compensate a 17-year-old that possesses no college degree, but brings a wealth of lived experiences and connections to the local community. Here is how Weah remembers those early days:

“We had to forge a new path and do the physical startup at the same time. The first few years we had a lot of super high expectations on what we were going to do, and people were watching. We were just trying to formulate the logistics of a new nonprofit. So starting from scratch to set up new systems was hard work. I vowed never to work for another startup!”

**Organizational confidence**

Despite the challenges, Youthprise found that lacking a map was not a liability. It was an invitation to create its own path. It inspired innovation, not timidity. Youthprise used its freedom to continually rethink everything. Despite being newbies to the youth equity space, it overcame skepticism and became respected leaders and trendsetters in the field. As Vice-President Pope expressed: “I feel like, when I come to work, if we see something that needs to be done, there aren’t any boundaries. We’re going to do it!”

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**Insights**

The journey to equity is too complex to start with a pre-determined map forward.

**Destination:** There will be no shortage of vested interests that will want you to follow their map.

**Strength:** Not having a map can be a strength, rather than a liability, because it leaves the space for innovation wide open.

**Trust:** The journey is made possible by having a funder that is willing to step back, avoid micromanaging, and allow the organization to create its own path.
Footprint 4: Carry a compass and know your true north

The fourth footprint on the journey to equity is the need for a compass to guide decision-making. Although Youthprise didn’t have a map, its leaders did possess an internal compass based on self-knowledge, core values, past experiences, and a vision for the world they wanted to create.

A compass provides reliable guidance because it always points to true north based on the earth’s magnetic field. Hikers use it to confirm whether they are headed in the correct geographic direction. In the world of organizations, leaders’ true north is represented by their mission, vision and core values.

Youthprise from the start relocated its organizational true north away from being field-focused—exclusively enhancing the OST network; to being needs-focused—supporting whatever youth’s needs emerged at a given time. That switch ultimately led Youthprise to provide timely support for seemingly unconnected needs far afield from after-school activities including pandemic relief, drivers’ education, and juvenile justice.

Shifting your true north changes how an organization looks at the world. Youthprise saw quality OST programs not as an end in themselves, but as one strategy towards something much larger. As Zen Buddhists warn, “Don’t mistake the pointing finger for the moon.” OST programs represented only one potential path about how to get there. The real moon was a more just and equitable society and would have many fingers.

Establishing direction without a map
Youthprise’s compass pointed to the triple, intersecting needs for youth leadership, racial equity and systems change. The organization’s projects might continually change, but true north wouldn’t. As one long-time, board member observed:

“What is critical to Youthprise’s success in this field is not losing sight of why they’re doing what they’re doing. No matter—from the first time I met Wokie to now, which is 10 years ago, she has never lost sight of why she’s doing what she’s doing and for whom she’s doing it. Even though Youthprise is much bigger, lots of funding, lots of press, lots of accolades, lots of this, lots of that, she never gets distracted. The board has changed over many times, but she’s the constant.”

Interviewer: “And what is her biggest idea, her focus?”

Answer: “The youth. Nothing matters more than what we’re doing for the youth.

Weah and Pope’s past work experiences gave them the confidence to create their own compass. Youthprise’s staff members appreciated having an organizational compass that provided both inspiration and stability.
The fifth footprint on the journey to equity involves acquiring the resources needed to equip an organization for the adventure. Youthprise’s leaders realized, despite McKnight’s sizable initial investment, that their dreams would always be larger than their pocketbook. The organization therefore sought to not only distribute existing donations, but to invent ways to entrepreneurially leverage new ones.

Youthprise wanted to grow its budget, which meant the organization would need to shift from one that simply gave money away, to one that entrepreneurially employed those funds to pursue additional dollars. Extra resources could expand the budget for direct service, additional grants, unexpected crises, and long-term financial security. As Vice-President Pope explained:

“Youthprise is an entrepreneurial organization. We have always been. We’ve never rested on our laurels. We never had the attitude that because McKnight is giving us $5 million, that we have arrived. A lot of the thinking was: How can we get more money, because people need more things. So it took a while for the field to catch up with who Youthprise was, and what we were trying to accomplish.”

This decision to become an entrepreneurial organization set the tone for who Youthprise would become, what kinds of strategic partnerships it would form, and what it would be able to accomplish. Its budget grew to over $10 million annually over its first 10 years.

Entrepreneurial example
What does leveraging look like at the local level? One of the early examples happened in the adjoining, racially diverse communities of Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. Youthprise offered to invest $100,000 for a youth employment program to build 21st century job skills among underserved youth, if local leaders could match that amount. With that incentive, the two cities raised $140,000 in two months, plus an additional $80,000 to develop internships and a youth job fair. The math is simple. Youthprise’s $100,000 was now worth $320,000. Youthprise wins. The two cities win. And most importantly, youth win.

Two funding challenges
McKnight’s initial investment in Youthprise came with two downsides. First, while McKnight had been providing $6 million annually to the OST field, Youthprise received $5 million in the first year, and needed $1 million to build the organization’s infrastructure. So, there would be an immediate 33% drop in funds available to distribute. Some previously funded organizations would be deeply disappointed. The second challenge concerned meeting the IRS Public Support Test whereby nonprofits must receive 33% of their donations from public sources. But McKnight was a private foundation. As Pope explained: “We possessed all of this private money and there was no practical way to just be a small grant maker. That was a literal recipe for death.” The organization would need to raise substantial public dollars quickly through federal, state, and county-level government money they could count as public support. Marcus noted that the Board for the first time understood the circumstances: “That was when everyone said a huge light bulb went on. So they let us start using our resources to build partnerships and to leverage other dollars, which then helped us grow.”

Footprint 5:
Think like an entrepreneur

Insights
Organizations need to become social entrepreneurs to grow their resources.
Think Big: The desire for more funding never goes away, because of the size and scope of current inequities.
Be Entrepreneurial: Organizations on the journey to equity need to think beyond only obtaining grants, to entrepreneurially grow their own resources.
Be Nimble: Organizations that can generate their own resources possess more flexibility to respond to urgent community needs and crises such as the COVID pandemic.
Be Compliant: Entrepreneurial initiatives enable nonprofit organizations to diversify their funding base and become compliant with IRS regulations.
Who to Take on the Journey  
(Footprints 6 to 10)

Attract the right board
Attract people already on a journey to equity
Attract a team connected to the community
   Attract new players and purposes
Attract partners. Never travel alone
The sixth footprint on the journey to equity is to recruit board members that are a good fit for each developmental stage on the journey. Youthprise found that an organization might need one set of board members to start the journey, and another to finish the journey. The challenges of the startup stage are exponentially different from the challenges of an established organization seeking profound societal change.

The journey to equity is shaped not only by what organizations do and how they do it, but also by who does it. From its inception, Youthprise faced multiple questions about governance: What type of board members would be best to accompany the beginning of their journey? What role would they play in designing the organization? What would be the preferred relationship between the board and the new leadership?

McKnight hired a consulting firm to recruit the original board members. That company identified a roster of highly educated, influential, and experienced public figures that would bring extensive knowledge about organizational development.

After being hired, Weah inherited that board. In those early days, the board played a significant role in governing that at times bordered on running the organization. Weah today speaks positively about how helpful that proved to be in the initial months. As the journey progressed, however, tensions emerged between the board and staff about how to share power, direction, funding choices, and the best metrics for assessing organizational performance.

What got you here won’t get you there.

After the initial startup phase, Youthprise’s leaders wanted the board to evolve into a more activist, racially diverse, and out-of-the-box thinking partner. The best way to see that change today is to consider the two board co-chairs at Youthprise’s 10th anniversary. One is a health technology entrepreneur, from a Nigerian immigrant family, and the other is a young African American Ivy League student.

The Youthprise board today is not only different; so is the world. As Pope notes, the world changed, and the board needed to evolve along with it: “The world has changed since 10 years ago in pretty big ways. Our board has consistently evolved to meet the demands of the times.” Weah cited examples of those changes: Because of COVID, because so many inequities were exposed, because of George Floyd … there has been a real racial awakening. People are having different types of discussions.
The seventh footprint on the journey is to recruit staff and board members who are already on their own personal journey to equity, and now desire to join a larger organizational journey. Youthprise attracted people that saw their own liberation intertwined with other’s liberation.

Youthprise attracted staff and board members who had already started their own personal journey to equity long before joining the organization. That meant they brought insights and passion to contribute to the organization’s work. We asked those involved in-depth questions to understand when they first noticed disparities, how they interpreted what they saw, and when they decided to commit to this work. Here are four findings.

1. **People come to Youthprise from a vast range of different backgrounds and experiences. There is no one road that they travel.**

   People came to Youthprise from every conceivable background. There was no formula to predict who is attracted to this work. Some people showed up from families and communities that are racially and ethnically homogeneous, and others from environments that were full of diversity. Some showed up from a lifetime with privilege, while others showed up from spaces of countless hurdles. Some showed up as first or second-generation immigrants, while others had centuries-long residence in the USA. Some had expensive private school educations, while others attended low-resource public schools. What they all had in common is that they arrived with a deep care about the fate of youth, a respect for Youthprise’s work, and a passion for equity.

   There are always people, of course, that don’t gain awareness or even start the journey. One board member offered his hypothesis about why that might be true.

   “...so many people don’t ever start that awareness stage. I think it’s because they’re comfortable. And I think that their privilege doesn’t create an opportunity for them to see it, like a fish doesn’t know it’s in water...”

2. **People’s personal journeys are launched by formative experiences in their home, school, and community that build awareness of inequities.**

   People become aware of inequities in infinite ways. Some enjoyed positive experiences (this is what the world should look like), and others endured negative experiences (this is not what the world should look like). Children, in their own way, are natural born sociologists. They expect the world to make sense. When it doesn’t, they are confused and want to know why.

3. **People require the right conditions to develop an understanding of inequities.**

   People reported that understanding developed through a combination of time, a safe space, mentors, finding the right words, and reflection on their own personal history and that of their communities.

4. **People make a commitment because they find a place to pursue their passion for equity.**

   People that are aware and understand inequities may want to change the world, but they require an outlet or place to do that. Youthprise provided an innovative avenue to pursue their dreams of a more just world.
The eighth footprint on the journey to equity is to invite staff and board members to join the team that have grown up in the local community or similar context, and have experienced and fought against some of the same injustices. People from those backgrounds add a layer of credibility, proximity, and courage to an organization.

When McKnight founded Youthprise, it hoped the new intermediary would be able to build closer relationships with the community than is possible for a foundation. What “the community” means in Minnesota changed dramatically over the past 30 years. Youthprise assembled a team that reflected the Twin Cities’ growing diversity as an essential strategy for three reasons.

1. **Credibility: Your organization looks like the community.**
   Many organizations work in the community, but don’t look like the community. That is not a problem for Youthprise. The team includes immigrants from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Liberia, Mexico, Malaysia, Southeast Asia and elsewhere. They speak languages as diverse as Spanish, Swahili, Hmong, and Somali. They represent multiple faiths. And the staff are 30% young people under 25, and 75% people of color.

   Whenever Youthprise observed other organizations with monocultural leadership teams, they saw it as a symptom of a larger historical and systemic problem. Youthprise wanted to be a leader, not a symptom. It’s diverse team provided a visible model of a world where everyone possesses an opportunity to rise to the top. Its staff expressed appreciation for their White colleagues who do “amazing, important and passionate work.” At the same time, they also believed that there needed to be a better leadership pipeline for people of color.

2. **Proximity: Your team possesses a strong, local connection to the issues you’re trying to solve.**
   While a diverse team is important, Pope pointed out that the deeper question is: “What is the organization doing differently because of that?” He explained, “It’s not just having the right rainbow at the table; it’s also about changing practices. That’s where we need to move people.” What’s important beyond race and ethnicity is what comes along with that: the shared, lived experiences that are proximate to the issues you’re trying to solve. “Proximate” is one of Pope’s favorite words. A strong community connection gives the organization insights to think and strategize in more profound ways.

3. **Courage: No decision about us without us.**
   Pope shared that having those who have experienced the same injustices in the room is also more likely to inspire courageous action: “Having people who have lived experience and a level of intimacy with some of the issues makes it easier to act and take bold steps to make change. Because they have touched it; they’re close to it.” In one example, a state law prevented high school students from obtaining unemployment insurance during Covid. Having a young person on the board denied benefits made Youthprise aware of that and allowed the organization to successful sue the state and change that policy.

**Insights**

It is vital to include staff and board members that are representative of the community, connected to the community, and share lived experiences with the community.

**Credibility:** When your staff and board look like the community it serves, it adds a measure of credibility and trust.

**Proximity:** When your staff and board come from the community that you serve (or a similar community), they can bring insights and connections.

**Courage:** When you employ staff and board that have been affected by the same community issues, it can inspire the organization to take bold steps.
Philanthropic organizations on a journey to equity possess a giant lever for change: who to support financially.

Youthprise’s decision to venture into new funding territory set the tone and character of the organization to create systemic change. Youthprise sought to use grant-giving to reinvent the OST field in the following six ways.

**Strategy #1** Expand the base of grantees to bring new people and organizations into the field. The new grant recipients included organizations that possessed less visibility, lower funding, and fewer previous connections to the philanthropic world. What they did have was strong community roots and a focus on diverse youth.

**Strategy #2** Encourage the out-of-school-time field to think bigger about their role in youth’s lives. Youthprise took funding that had previously been targeted exclusively for after-school activities and applied it to issues as broad as ensuring that youth had food to eat, a home to live in, and even shoes and a backpack for school.

**Strategy #3** Push out-of-school-time organizations to diversify their boards and staff. Youthprise made a bold decision: the foundation would no longer fund organizations that served a high percentage of young people of color if they didn’t have people of color on their board or staff.

**Strategy #4** Provide new organizations with not only funding, but capacity-building. Youthprise developed an approach that President Weah calls a “grants-plus model.” It provided smaller organizations not just with grants, but also connections to other funders and technical support.

**Strategy #5** Target some OST funding opportunities to specific racial and ethnic groups. Youthprise was very comfortable explicitly targeting grants to specific racial and economic groups that experienced problems related to their identity. Many people and organizations are not.

**Strategy #6** Invest directly in individual youth’s community change projects. Youthprise’s invited youth to competitively apply for funding a project of their own choosing. Those selected would get support to design and implement their ideas. One Change Fellow used a $5,000 grant to bring his diverse Northside community together for a huge block, party-style community event called “Intro to Success” that continues eight years later.
Footprint 10:
Attract partners. Never travel alone

The tenth footprint on the journey to equity is to form partnerships with a wide range of nonprofits, corporations, foundations, educational institutions, and governmental agencies. The ability to pool strengths and resources will potentially multiply everyone’s capacity, resources and impact.

Youthprise’s broad portfolio includes youth philanthropy, entrepreneurship, nutrition, economic opportunity, housing, job training and more. What’s the secret that makes all these varied projects work? How does Youthprise outperform what is expected even given McKnight’s generous investment?

Vice-President Pope explained Youthprise’s mindset. It is how the organization multiplied its resources and impact through forming mutually beneficial, cross-sector partnerships. Far from being a solitary hero, Vice President Pope describes Youthprise’s role this way:

“We’re not the be all, end all. We’re that ingredient that comes in. There’s that secret sauce that makes the burger great. We’re that added component that accelerates things that otherwise may be stagnant. And it’s not that we’re all of the components, but we’re an essential ingredient…All the work we do is to help make systems work better for those where otherwise they wouldn’t.”

Because of the breadth of Youthprise’s portfolio, the organization sought partners from a wide range of fields. Here are three examples of partnerships.

1. Partner with the State of Minnesota Department of Public Safety to cut juvenile incarceration rates. In the first year in one targeted Saint Paul neighborhood, there was a 40% reduction in juvenile arrests.

2. Partner with the Hennepin County Government for pregnancy prevention. For the first time in 10 years, the County’s teen birth rate dipped below the statewide average.

3. Partner with the City of Saint Paul to reduce youth violence and arrests. Project sites averaged a 66% decrease in detention rates (22% more than in nonparticipating jurisdictions).

Youthprise found that it could inspire partnerships and multiply impact by matching dollars rather than giving dollars. Youthprise’s Development Committee recommended in December, 2013 to run a pilot test with $800,000 in potential matching grants. The response proved so impactful that eight months later, the full board voted unanimously to increase the amount to $2 million for the following year.
What Happens When Youth Join the Journey (Footprints 11 and 12)

Youth bring irreplaceable value
Youth help govern the journey
Footprint 11:
Youth irreplaceable value

The eleventh footprint is to elevate the role that youth play on the journey to equity. While negative and limiting stereotypes of youth are common, Youthprise took advantage of their talent, energy and creativity by placing them in positions of genuine responsibility and decision-making.

Youthprise’s support of high levels of youth engagement made the organization more authentic, credible, creative, and, interestingly enough, financially viable.

Youthprise’s young staff members enjoyed an unusually large space to think about and test their own ideas. When hired at age 17, one person recalls Weah telling her: “I can’t wait to see what you will do.” It was an invitation not just to implement the organization’s initiatives, but also to help invent it. That same individual learned that she could count on Weah’s support.

“I always admired Wokie that whenever I had an idea and needed to get permission for something I wanted to implement at Youthprise, I knew automatically that Wokie would be down. I always knew like ‘Okay, she’s going to support it. I can check her off the list.’ And she was always willing to back my unconventional approaches as well.”

Consider how youth impacted these four areas.

1. **Research: Youth Amplifying Young People’s Voices**
   Youthprise’s youth-led research initiative wouldn’t have happened without youth who saw it as a way to “disrupt systems.” Today, this Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach reflects the principle that people most affected by a particular issue (e.g., youth) should be part of the research and analysis to get the best solutions. Issues tackled ranged from why families aren’t accessing a suburban food bank, to gentrification, and to teen homelessness.

2. **Philanthropy: Youth Making Grant Decisions**
   Weah had long expressed an interest in “taking on the philanthropy system” (where donors decide what you should do). Youthprise imported the European YouthBank model where 14 to 25-year-olds study local issues, call for grants, interview applicants, make funding decisions, and evaluate the results.

3. **Professional Development**
   Youth Grew a Half Million-Dollar Service. Youthprise’s youth team grew a professional development capacity to support organizations wanting to integrate youth voice that generated substantial funds

4. **Public policy**
   Youth’s Success in Changing State Legislation. Youthprise grew a robust presence for youth influencing public policymaking. Their work included an environmental scan, youth-led focus groups, and youth ideation groups brainstormed solutions.

**Insights**

Youth can play vital roles on the journey to equity.

**Transformation:** When youth are authentically integrated into day-to-day work, it will redefine and redirect the entire organization.

**Assets:** Though youth sometimes possess less professional experience, they bring other valuable assets based on their age, point of view, and lived experience.

**Speed Bumps:** There is no perfect formula or model for doing youth-adult partnerships that avoids some speed bumps and potholes.

**Benefits:** Youth can make significant contributions to tasks usually reserved for adult staff, including professional development, research, philanthropy, and public policy.
The twelfth footprint on the journey to equity is that youth not only join the trek; they help oversee and govern the expedition too.

Neal Cuthbert, the former McKnight Foundation’s vice-president, recognized how revolutionary the idea was to form a board comprised of equal numbers of youth and adults.

“When they said they were going to create a board with 50% youth, we said, ‘Yeah, do that.’ And I think we kind of went, ‘Really? They’re going to do that?’ But this was Wokie. You’ve got to walk the talk, and she was walking the talk and brought a lot of us along, who probably loved the talk, but maybe didn’t have the fortitude for the walk. She did.”

President Weah understood that having youth on the board represented deep organizational change even in a very personal way (i.e. they would be her boss). Today, the inclusion of youth board members is formally written into the organization’s bylaws, there is a youth co-chair for the entire board, and youth co-chairs for every committee. Youthprise started cautiously, bringing small numbers of youth onto its board, until they reached a point where board makeup today is 50% youth (16 to 24-years-old) and 50% adults. To make the model work, Youthprise needed to find answers to these six challenges.

**Challenge #1: Inclusion. Do youth and adults want to be on a board together?**

**Challenge #2: Authenticity: Do organizations want youth as tokens or as full-fledged members?**

**Challenge #3: Preparation: Are youth and adults prepared to be on a board together?**

**Challenge #4: Structure. Does a board need to change how meetings operate when youth join?**

**Challenge #5: Culture. What kind of culture is needed on a youth-adult board?**

**Challenge #6: Room Setup. How do you design the meeting room for an adult-youth board?**

Adult board members interviewed consistently shared positive comments about the experiment. In one adult member’s words: “This is weird, but it isn’t about what we do for them. It’s also how we are benefitting from them.”

Youth similarly saw the benefits on their own lives: “Joining Youthprise so young allowed me to see how systems work behind the scenes. ... It allowed me to think more critically not only about the problems, but how to solve them.”
How to Journey Off the Beaten Path (Footprints 13 to 18)

Be willing to explore new paths to equity

Climb trees to gain a better view of the possibilities and obstacles on the trail

Prepare for bad weather

Advocate for public policies to accelerate the journey

Pay attention to travelers’ mindsets as well as their skillsets

Use data to locate where you are on the trail
The thirteenth footprint on the journey to equity involves getting off the beaten path. Youthprise’s leaders knew that following the well-worn practices to increase equity would be insufficient for the type of change they envisioned. Everything would need to be tested and reinvented.

Youthprise’s DNA from the start included questioning everything. To follow futurist Buckminster Fuller’s advice, the organization decided not to fight the existing model, but to “build a new model that makes the old model obsolete.” What marked Youthprise’s journey was not any single change, but the quantity and scope of changes.

Youthprise’s triple commitments to youth engagement, racial equity, and systems change pushed the organization to rethink and reinvent its original mission, geography, governance, hiring, fund development, grantees, and engagement with both the state government, and the engagement.

President Weah explained that Youthprise’s many moves surprised even some of the organization’s original supportive sponsors:

“I always give McKnight a lot of credit. I don’t think that they anticipated that we would be as innovative as we were. Where innovation led us was not to be a typical OST organization. We didn’t just want to build the OST field, because we understood from the beginning that inequities existed across fields.”

Shifting from McKnight’s original purpose
The original name for the new intermediary was “OST Minnesota.” Youthprise single largest shift came from moving away from that limited mission to instead combine under one organizational umbrella a diverse grant-making portfolio discussed in previous footprints. Few expected the new organization to include a consulting business, youth-led research, a nutrition program serving a million meals a year, and more.

It is not easy to classify what Youthprise has become in traditional terms. One community partner expressed her astonishment: “Maybe it was just part of Youthprise’s evolution, but I felt like: Oh, here comes another strategic plan.” President Weah saw the diversity of projects, however, as a natural outgrowth of the organization’s mission to create true equity wherever it was needed.

A focus on experimentation and learning Youthprise created its own, one-of-a-kind, path for the journey to equity. As President Weah shared:

“We tested and tried all sorts of stuff for the first four or five years, and that’s continued. Different initiatives would pop up. From the beginning we’ve had a culture and a commitment to being a learning organization and an emphasis on taking risks. We’d say, ‘Just try it. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work. We can always shift it, right? We’ll do something else.’”

**Insights**

An organization on the journey to equity requires fresh thinking and fresh maps.

**Scope:** Once organizations leave the beaten path, they may find the need to rethink not just one, but multiple dimensions of how to operate.

**Leadership:** Leaders play a key role in encouraging their staff to be innovative, to test radical ideas, and to see failure as an inevitable and helpful part of the learning process.

**Motivation:** What drives organizations to get off the beaten path is their passion for making deeper and more sustainable change.

**Innovation:** Organizations will need to continually experiment and learn.

**Definition:** Organizations may need to expand or redefine their purpose beyond their original charter to increase equity.
Footprint 14: Climb a tall tree to get a better view of the trail

The fourteenth footprint on the journey to equity involves organizations climbing up high enough to proverbially see the forest (the causes of inequities), instead of just the trees (the inequities themselves). That requires organizations to move their eyes off the immediate path in front of them, and to look for the bigger picture to explore the deeper causes that perpetuate inequities and develop strategies to change them.

Ten years ago, some members among the McKnight Foundation's board and the McKnight family possessed differing opinions about whether or not to continue its long-term funding for OST programs. McKnight Vice-President Neal Cuthbert summarized the argument for change.

“... This is like the forever war and we’re not making any progress. Nothing’s happening; we have nothing to show. We’ve spent tens of millions of dollars ... but it’s not getting better in any stretch of the imagination.”

Those comments go to the core of a perpetual, classic debate within the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors. Is it better to take care of society’s wounds, or go to the source of what is causing those wounds? While there is a continual need for both, Youthprise prioritized addressing root causes on its journey to equity for reasons explained by one long-term board member:

“A lot of organizations, rightly so, are addressing short-term, immediate needs, which I think is very important. I do that too. I donate money. I help people. But it’s not what excites me, because we had poor people yesterday, we have poor people today, we’ll have poor people tomorrow. So why don’t we ask the question, ‘Why are there poor people and make that not happen?’

Making poverty “not happen” requires seeing and addressing multiple, complex, and interwoven factors. Youthprise therefore sought to listen to and respond to the needs of young people wherever they might lead. That led to an astonishing range of initiatives. What looked like mission creep to outsiders was to Youthprise a desire to impact the larger context of young people’s lives.

Improving how systems operate
One seasoned board member reflected how Youthprise taught him that it was possible for a nonprofit organization to identify and seize system-changing opportunities.

“I have this lifelong journey towards viewing everything as a system, viewing everything and everybody as connected to everything else. Youthprise, I found, was an organization that actually believed that. What Youthprise showed me is that there are things that can be done to affect the systems themselves, not just helping someone out for a day, a month, or a year. Before Youthprise, I never considered that it would be even possible to attempt that, let alone actually do it, outside of a governmental intervention.”

Insights
The journey to equity requires changing systems, not just individual lives. Here are three ways that can happen.

Increase Access: Systems determine who gets access to services and who does not. Equity often requires expanding eligibility.

Find Buried Treasure: Governmental systems sometimes allocate funds to increase equity that are underutilized because they are difficult to access. An organization can “dig up” such treasures and create easier paths for people and organizations to make use of them.

Challenge Discriminatory Systems: Systems can be set up, intentionally or unintentionally, to perpetuate inequities against certain racial and ethnic groups. Organizations can point out, challenge, and advocate for systems change so that all might thrive.
The fifteenth footprint on the journey to equity is to be prepared for the inevitable opposition that comes when an organization chooses to go off the beaten path. “Bad weather” can include people challenging your motives, competence, or decisions. Organizations will need courage and persistence on the journey to equity to stand up for their vision, values, and ideas.

Hikers often slow down or temporarily stop their trek when they encounter bad weather. On the journey to equity, bad weather comes in many forms. People and organizations seeking to maintain the status quo push against you. Others question your motives or competence. Some feel you are overstepping into their territory. People on the far left may say you are too conservative, and people on the far right may say you are too radical. It’s difficult to win!

Sometimes bad weather comes simply because an organization is ahead of its time. When the United States experienced a racial reckoning in 2020 with the murder of George Floyd, ordinary citizens felt a need to deepen their understanding of racial inequalities. Marcus Pope shared that it was as if the country was finally catching up with what Youthprise had been advocating for 10 years. “We were thinking about this intentionally before it became popular to say, ‘Oh, we’re about equity.’ We were pushing things that are now seen as ‘promising practices.”

The courage to do difficult things
One Youthprise board member shared, “If we’re going to see the changes we want, then we have to do the things that are hard and uncomfortable.” President Weah embodied that mindset.

“Our vision was always clear to me. This is who we are. This is what we want to be. And we wanted to do it in a way that didn’t really apologize for making the kind of choices that we made, to take the hits, to take the criticisms, to believe that at the end of the day it would be all right. I think that really required having confidence in our own vision, confidence in the model that we had built, and then confidence in our ability to use our skills as human beings to get people to come to the other side. McKnight established Youthprise. Our journey towards equity went through all kinds of twists and turns, but at the end of the day, we arrived to where McKnight was hoping we would get.”

A willingness to handle tough decisions
Youthprise never shied away from controversial challenges. In one example, the organization sued the state government (one of its largest funders). In another, it accepted a government grant tied to Homeland Security to support Somali youth organizations at a time when there was a great deal of anti-Muslim rhetoric. Critics on one side feared these organizations might be secretly radicalizing youth. Youthprise helped diffuse those public concern by closely vetting the organizations receiving funds. On the other side, the Somalis felt the grant labeled their youth as potentially dangerous. Youthprise helped diffuse those concerns through open dialogue and building interpersonal trust. Today, Youthprise’s Somali Youth Development Fund invests a half million dollars annually to 14 organizations spread around the state to provide positive youth development experiences for an important immigrant population. None of that is tied to Homeland Security.
The sixteenth footprint on the journey to equity involves influencing legislation that will impact youth.

**Policymakers’ Inner Journey:** Influencing policy requires persistence, EQ, adaptability, and patience within the legislative roller coaster, where bills can live and die many times before passing.

**Know Your Place:** Organizations need to identify their role in the legislative ecosystem. Are you an advocate, a noisemaker, a bridge, or something else? Your choice will determine your action and who is willing to partner with you.

**Create a Broad Agenda:** Identify a broad legislative agenda, but then be ready to push the individual policy options that are most likely to resonate at a particular political moment.

**Involve Youth:** Youth’s stories humanize abstract policy issues and may move legislators more than charts and numbers. Youth also can be tough negotiators.

**Build Nonpartisan Partnerships:** Cultivate and sustain trusting relationships with both sides of the political aisle to bring them together.

**Adapt Your Language:** Adapt your language to different political audiences. Both sides may want the same thing, but talk about it in different ways.

**Be Courageous:** There are times to take risks and push your agenda.

**Insights**

Youthprise’s path to legislative success

What led to Youthprise’s legislative success? Norris shared six strategies to become an influential voice at the State Capitol.

1. Map out a broad agenda.
2. Be non-partisan.
3. Adapt your language to your audience.
4. Know your place in the legislative system.
5. Build on the perspective and idealism of youth.
6. Make use of youth’s social media savvy.

When Matt Norris was 16 years old, he found himself sitting for the first time in a meeting for the Brooklyn Parks Citizen Long-Range Improvement Committee. He had recently been appointed to be the Committee’s first youth liaison. One of the agenda items that night included sharing the results of a citizen survey that showed crime, especially youth crime, as a top concern.

Norris was not shy to speak up. He suggested that one root cause of the problem might be the lack of activities for young people in the city. Over the next year-and-a-half, the town laid the groundwork and the City Council approved what continues to be called the Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth. Matt was hired as the initiative’s first employee.

Norris came to oversee Youthprise’s public policy agenda (and today has moved to be a state legislator himself). When he first arrived at the intermediary, Youthprise did not have an explicit focus on public policy. But if you want to change systems, it’s necessary to not only give out grants, but to influence legislation. Youthprise is now a well-known, well-respected, and constant presence in the State Capitol. The organization successfully helped pass a series of important pieces of legislation. Norris celebrates his opportunity to do this work but notes that the system is set up to be contentious and is not for the faint at heart.
The seventeenth footprint on the journey to equity is about the need to change the mindsets that have produced and reproduced inequities. Youthprise’s approach was always to focus on both the outer journey (creating equitable conditions) and the inner journey (creating mindsets that support racial equity).

People on the journey to equity are required to travel both a physical and mental distance. As European business consultant Luc Brabandere argues, you need to change the world twice: “It is necessary both to change the world, and how people see the world.”

Changing mindsets about youth engagement
Youthprise paid special attention to transforming people’s mindsets about youth. It talked about working not with “at-risk youth,” but with “opportunity youth.” While others might see youth’s inexperience or age as a detriment, Youthprise insisted that youth brought unique perspectives and talents to the journey. It faced two challenges in shifting others’ mindsets.

Challenge #1: Youth’s own mindsets

Challenge: Youthprise’s challenge was not only to change society’s mindset about youth. It was at times to change youth’s mindset about themselves. It is easy for young people to inherit misconceptions about themselves from the larger society.

Intervention: President Wokie Weah is fond of saying that: “Youth are high capability, but low opportunity.”

Youthprise created new opportunities where youth could grow and demonstrate their capabilities. Trying to change public policies? Invite youth to testify. Want to improve a nutrition program? Hold focus groups with neighborhood youth.

Want to teach organizations about the power of youth involvement? Have youth present the training. As one youth staff member shared: “Being able to create a space where young people can instill that self-worth for themselves is powerful. That is when the narrative inside actually changes.”

Challenge #2: Adult mindsets about youth

Challenge: Youthprise’s second challenge involved how to transform the mindsets of adults who work with youth. It learned that organizations might say they want to do “youth engagement work,” but then not want youth to be part of the process to make it happen.

Intervention: Youthprise’s youth staff learned to be patient to give adults the time they needed to shift their assumptions around youth-adult hierarchies, power, and influence. As a youth team member reflected:

“We found the most impactful work is when we have a lot of patience, trust-building and advocating for young people when we sit down with adults. ... We get used to working in a certain way, but we understand that that doesn’t hold for everyone.”

Insights

The prime takeaway for the seventeenth footprint is the importance of changing mindsets on the journey to equity.

Two Dimensions of Change: Progress requires changing the world twice—once in the physical and once in people’s heads.

Underestimation Fallacy: Some adults and youth hold a mindset that underestimates the potential and abilities of youth. That mindset can become a self-fulfilling prophecy if not addressed.

Creating Youth Opportunities: A key to overcoming the underestimation fallacy is to create opportunities where youth can nurture their self-confidence, develop their skills, and demonstrate their capabilities.

Patience for Adults: Adults may require time and patience to change their past assumptions about the role and potential of youth.
The eighteenth footprint on the journey to equity is to gather data that can be used to identify successes and failures. Organizations pursuing equity are often hard working, dedicated, and passionate. But are they helping eliminate disparities, and, if so, how would they know?

Thompson Aderinkomi is a first-generation American born to Nigerian parents, a successful business entrepreneur, and a board chair for Youthprise. He is also a graduate of the University of Minnesota with a master’s degree in statistics and an MBA. In other words, someone who appreciates the importance of quality data!

Aderinkomi served twice on the Youthprise board. The first time he quit amiably but abruptly over disagreements with who to fund, and a lack of data gathering on systems change. After several years, Youthprise not only invited Aderinkomi to rejoin the board, but to become co-chair. He saw that Youthprise was ready for change and said yes.

**What kind of data is valuable?**

Data can help inform an organization where it is on the journey to equity. Is it making a difference? Where and how much? What efforts are moving the needle on equity, and which efforts are not? The challenge, however, is to figure out what kinds of data are most helpful. Youthprise grew its commitment to collecting four types of data.

1. **Data to document program activity**
   First is numerically monitoring inputs (e.g. how many staff and hours invested on a project), and outputs (e.g. how many meals served in the nutrition program, or how many youth diverted from being incarcerated into juvenile detention).

2. **Data to assess project implementation.**
   The second type involved tracking implementation. For the nutrition program, was it being rolled out effectively? Were tweaks or changes needed? Did youth like the food being served? In one example, data gathering identified how much youth would like warm food during the frigid Minnesota winters. Youthprise then raised money from local foundations to install that equipment at several sites.

3. **Data to assess program impact**
   A third level of data gathering involved assessing the impact on participants’ lives.

4. **Data to support systems-level changes**
   Aderinkomi desired to know, at the deepest level, if Youthprise’s efforts were moving the needle on society’s larger inequities. As he shared: “For me, the way we know we’re making an impact is if all these disparities are going down, measured across the regions where Youthprise has influence. And if we’re not seeing a meaningful change, then it’s really hard to justify continuing the activities that we’re engaged in.”

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**Insights**

The eighteenth footprint is the importance for organizations to gather data to track their progress and challenges.

**Data Dashboard:** Organizations will benefit from carefully creating a dashboard about what types of data will help them to measure progress.

**Data-Driven Decisions:** Data can inform organizational decisions about which initiatives to improve, expand, or abandon.

**Data Conflict:** Board members may disagree about what types of data are most important to collect, and how they are used.

**Different Types of Data:** There are multiple levels of data that can help increase equity in unique ways: assessing if the program happened, if the implementation went smoothly, if individuals were impacted, and if systems change occurred.
How to Build a Culture for the Journey to Equity (Footprint 19)

Design an organizational culture that supports people, passion, and performance
Footprint 19: Use data to locate where you are on the trail

The nineteenth footprint on the journey to equity is to create an organizational culture that fosters individual growth, teamwork and high performance. Youthprise sought to make that happen by building a workplace that featured high engagement, healthy conflict, a willingness to test new ideas, and opportunities to deepen everyone’s understanding of equity.

Vice-President Pope dreamed of creating a “workplace of the future.” Building that culture for the journey, however, was never easy and never done. In board and staff interviews, five cultural qualities emerged as essential.

1. ENGAGEMENT: Create a culture marked by high staff and board engagement. Youthprise staff agreed as “mostly true” or “very true” that they are inspired by the mission (88%), and proud to be part of the organization’s mission (93%).

2. DEBATE: Create a culture that supports open dialogue, healthy debate, and conflict resolution. The journey to equity is emotionally-laden work. As Pope explains: “While the organization possesses a shared passion for social justice, there is also strong debate about how to make that happen.” The staff held regular small group meetings to air perspectives and feelings.

3. RELATIONSHIPS: Create a culture that sustains supportive interpersonal relationships. Youthprise’s hiring process includes two interviews. The first is focused on the skills and expertise. The second is focuses on whether the person is a strong cultural fit.

4. INNOVATION: Create a culture that supports experimentation and innovation. Youthprise sought to create a workplace that supported innovation, and accepted failure as an inevitable part of the learning process. As President Weah noted: “I do not know if there’s a failure that comes to mind that did not help us grow in a different way.”

5. GROWTH: Create a culture that supports people to keep deepening their skills, special talents, dreams, and understanding of racial equity work. Youthprise’s supervisors encouraged—especially young people—to identify how they wanted to grow their special talents, and achieve long-term dreams. That included everything from career plans to photography to increasing their competence and comfort around racial equity work.

Insights

The nineteenth footprint is about the importance of building an organizational culture that supports people to be successful in their lives and work. Here are five cultural qualities to make that happen.

Engagement: The journey requires high staff and board engagement to meet the complex demands of equity work.

Debate: The journey requires open dialogue, healthy debate, and conflict resolution to find the best ways to support social justice and equity.

Relationships: The journey requires a culture where people experience strong interpersonal relationships, and feel supported by a sense of belonging, comfort, and respect.

Innovation: The journey requires a culture that supports experimentation and innovation to find the best ideas and accepts failure as a necessary stage in the learning process.

Growth: The journey requires a culture where people are given the space, trust, and opportunity to discuss and deepen their personal understanding of racial equity work.
The Future of the Journey: Now What? (Footprint 20)

Invent a new future for a new era
The twentieth footprint on the journey to equity is about continually looking beyond day-to-day events to think about an unknown future.

We asked Youthprise team members: What are your hopes and dreams for the organization’s future? Their central message pointed to the organization need to both build on past successes and not be afraid to change. Marcus Pope, who became the new Youthprise President on January 1, 2022, embraced and celebrated that challenge. For him, Youthprise’s decade-long legacy is a starting point, not an ending point.

“The work that Wokie’s done is pivotal. I told her, if I don’t do a better job, if I’m not more impactful than you have been, I would have failed, because you laid the groundwork. So we need to build on that legacy. I think we need to continue to push the early work we did that was groundbreaking at that time. People have caught up. So there’s a new generation of work that we need to do.”

Youthprise’s team shared Pope’s desire to expand beyond the status quo. Some cautioned him against attempting to fill Wokie’s shoes or walk in her footsteps. Instead, they talked about Marcus articulating his vision internally and externally about where he is headed, and what will be his way of doing things.

Ten dreams for the future
Youthprise’s team identified 10 dreams for the future.

Dream #1: Stick to our north star.
Dream #2: Expand our geographic reach.
Dream #3: Grow a $50 million annual budget
Dream #4: Build economic equality.
Dream #5: Increase the organization’s visibility.
Dream #6: Engage youth even more.
Dream #7: Institutionalize being innovative and disruptive change makers.
Dream #8: Focus on the culture.
Dream #9: Focus on systems and policy change.
Dream #10: Regularly assess the number and health of community partnerships.

Insights

The prime takeaways from the twentieth footprint involves taking time (amid the daily demands) to dream about how an organization can contribute to making an even better future.

Values: Don't compromise the core values and ideas guiding your journey.
Youth: Continue to find and expand ways to tap the talents of diverse youth.
Scale: Consider whether you are ready and want to expand your geographic footprint and impact.
Sustainability: Know that sustainability comes from having both money and great ideas.
Impact: It will require changing systems and policies to achieve equity on measures such as household wealth.
Visibility: Use strategic communications to increase visibility and support.
Culture: Determine, grow, and manage the culture you need for the journey.
Partnerships: Regularly assess and manage the strength and health of your partnerships.
CODA: Final Reflections

Before the founding of Youthprise, the McKnight Foundation sought guidance from youth about their dreams for the new organization. The young people’s answers, ten years later, look like a prescription for what Youthprise would actually become.

• “Be bold! ”
• “Please be a place where there is hope for all youth.”
• “We need all the good stories about young people.”
• “Please keep the frame positive about youth as assets (not as future criminals).”
• “Focus on the potential of all youth – creating a wide variety of opportunities for all to thrive.”
• “Utilize the process of authentic youth engagement – it brings such amazing outcomes!”

This investigation began with James Baldwin words that: “A journey is called that because you cannot know what you will....do with what you find, or what you find will do to you.” When Youthprise launched its journey in 2011, the organization’s focus on racial equity was ahead of its time. Over the next ten years, however, those issues became increasingly central to the nation’s political debate. The country splintered over issues that included everything from Civil War statues to how schools teach racial history to the killing of George Floyd.

Throughout all those controversies, Youthprise never took its eye off the prize. The 20 footprints are about how the organization made significant progress to increase youth opportunity fueled by a singular vision, imagination, risk-taking, systems thinking, collaboration, and courage. That courage came initially from the McKnight Foundation, then from the top Youthprise leadership, then the organization’s board and staff, and finally from the youth themselves. While Youthprise’s leaders deserve substantial credit for placing youth in key, responsible roles, the young people perhaps deserve even more credit. The youth staff, some of them just graduated from high school, embraced opportunities to learn new skills to become successful policymakers, philanthropists, consultants, board members, and researchers.

For Youthprise’s President Wokie Weah, listening to and trusting youth was not just a nice thing to do. It became a fundamental organizational strategy for meaningful change.

“Early on, we realized that young people had a very good sense of the world they would want to inherit. And you had to take their opinions into account. If you didn’t, you could build a really great system, right? It just might not work with the clientele. So we always try to wrap Youthprise’s work around the dreams and visions of what young people want for themselves.”