“EVERY DAY, we write the future / Together, we sign it / Together, we declare it
We share it / For this truth marches on / Inside each of us.”

— Amanda Gorman, Youth Poet Laureate
TRUE STAR trains underserved youth communities in Chicago to create, develop, and market digital content on platforms that empower them to forge their own paths. We are inspiring the dreams of Black and Latino youth so they can find their voice, discover their path, and prepare for life.
MESSAGE FROM OUR BOARD PRESIDENT

It may be cliche, but young people truly are our hope for the future. They observe the world—both the good and the bad—with fresh eyes. That’s how they can see the solutions we need for a better tomorrow. I believe this, because I’ve seen it. When young people have access to resources and opportunities through True Star, the future they envision becomes reality.

In 2021, True Star youth impressed me time and again. A great example is the True Star Social Enterprise team that provided content development services to small businesses, nonprofits, and agencies, including the Flowers Communications Group and the Chicago Department of Public Health Office of Violence Prevention. These students were paid to provide real-world support, developing digital content that was implemented on various channels. What a great win-win!

This is just one example of how True Star youth have inspired change this past year. You’ll find many more throughout this annual report. Every single story and stat connects back to your investment. Your support this past year has made a lasting difference in Chicago’s youth! Thanks to you, they took steps to find their voice, discover their path, and prepare for life through the programming available at True Star.

Thank you for inspiring Chicago’s youth!

LaTonya Wilkens
Board President

Founder, Change Coaches
Bestselling Author of Leading Below the Surface
MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS

Ever since the pandemic hit, we’ve all had to face limits. Both personally and collectively, we’ve each had to bear the burdens of living in the COVID-19 era. That’s what makes the accomplishments of the young people here at True Star all the more exciting and admirable. They are showing us how to press on in today’s reality for a better tomorrow.

Our students are shining bright thanks to friends like you who partner with True Star financially. Your gifts enable them to access real-world resources and opportunities within the fast-growing digital content and media industry. They are developing, creating, and producing media-based projects in journalism, video production, broadcasting and podcasting, digital marketing, photography, and graphic design. Through these projects, our students are enhancing their voices and skills, which has an immeasurable impact on their future—and ours. When they shine, they lead us all into a brighter future.

We’re excited about what’s ahead for True Star and our students, especially because of the traction we are gaining through our unique industry-based model. It combines professional-led training with professional-level experience. Our aim in the year ahead is to grow our corporate connections and partnerships so our students can make an even greater impact.

With so many opportunities ahead, we hope you will continue to invest in our students in 2022. Together, we can ensure their ideas for a bright future come to fruition through digital content projects and experiences. We can’t wait to see the tomorrow they have in mind, and we look forward to partnering with you to make the future as bright as it can be for us all.

DeAnna McLeary-Sherman
Na-Tae’ Thompson
Co-Founders & Directors
Real-world change for Chicago’s youth.

WHY TRUE STAR

Youth in underserved communities don’t have the same access and interaction with media technology tools as their more affluent counterparts. Inequities like these hamper opportunities and future potential. It creates a no-win scenario for the future. Both individually and collectively, we all lose when young people aren’t allowed to shine.

That’s why True Star exists. When underserved youth have access to real-world resources and opportunities, they find their voice, discover their path, and prepare for life. They shine—and the world is all the brighter because of it!

Through on-the-job training programs made possible through True Star, students develop, create, and produce digital content projects in journalism, video production, broadcasting and podcasting, digital marketing, photography, and graphic design.

Our unique industry-based model combines professional-led training with professional-level experience. Students gain an education rooted in experience. They gain a foothold in the professional world. And they gain a vision for implementing their ideas to solve real-world problems.

Thanks to the support of True Star donors and partners, today’s young people in Chicago are inspired and ready to create tomorrow’s reality.
Content creators in the making.

YOUR 2021 IMPACT

Thanks to your investment this past year, youth involved in True Star programming found their voice, discovered their path, and prepared for life.

- **125** students involved
- **200** job-training opportunities provided
- **12,250** hours of training for students
- **95%** high school graduation rate
- **75%** of graduates enrolled in higher ed
- **$150,000** in stipends & pay
- **12** companies involved
- **22** professionals involved
YOUTH VOICE EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

Young people are ripe with ideas and talent. What they need is encouragement and confidence to voice them. That’s what our Youth Voice Empowerment program is all about. True Star helps our students envision themselves as viable contributors and participants in the world of media, business, and technology.

Through robust media programming and activities, students analyze the social conditions around them and abroad. These opportunities teach students how to think critically, conduct research, and discuss issues with both their peers and experts. The result? Students find confidence in their ideas and learn how to present them to the world.

IMPRESSION OUTCOMES

★ Confidence
★ Leadership development
★ Critical thinking skills
★ Research experience
★ Teamwork & participation
★ Verbalizing ideas & persuasive opinions
★ Hope & vision for the future
★ Creative expression
A world of possibilities.

REAL-WORLD EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

Black and Latinx students across Chicago represent an immense talent pool—one that’s routinely untapped. That’s why our Real-World Experience program is essential. It provides young people access to corporate and community experiences where they can develop, create, and produce digital content projects in journalism, video production, broadcasting and podcasting, digital marketing, photography, and graphic design. Through these media projects, our students are enhancing their voices and skills, which has an immeasurable impact on their future.

TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT

★ On-the-job training
★ Corporate connections & social capital
★ Competitive skills in specialized fields
★ Higher academic performance
★ Mentorship with caring adults
★ Prep for higher education
★ Build resumes & portfolios for future careers
SOCIAL MEDIA, JOURNALISM, & FILM

Everything about 2021 has some connection to the global COVID-19 pandemic. It disrupted and altered our plans, and angered and grieved our communities and families. But against this backdrop a bright spot of hope shined through, sparked by True Star youth.

Despite everything the pandemic forced upon them, our students courageously pushed back with an educational campaign to encourage teen vaccination. Honing students’ skills in journalism, public speaking, digital media, video production, and community outreach, their #Vax2NormalChi campaign included:

- Essays by True Star journalists covered perspectives around COVID, vaccines, and remote learning.
- True Star Ambassadors sought to raise vaccination rates in South Shore, Bronzeville, Garfield Park, and Roseland by distributing information on where and how to get vaccinated.
- True Star students convene a Teen Hall with Dr. Allison Arwady, Commissioner of the Chicago Department of Public Health, so their peers could ask questions and raise concerns regarding the vaccine.
- True Star produced its first docuseries, Champions Adjust. Youth athletes share the impact COVID has had on their lives.
- An Instagram platform to share campaign elements and host Live #VaxChats, including one with Dr. Wendy Goodall McDonald who addressed concerns about the vaccine’s impact on fertility.

The leadership and determination our students displayed in this project is truly a highlight of 2021. They put their creative energy to work to be part of the solution. It’s all possible thanks to friends like you who give! Your support makes True Star possible and gives our students the chance to shine.
Boosting school safety through de-escalation training.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

When young people are inspired, they inspire change that makes a lasting difference for us all. That’s exactly what happened when True Star Youth launched Change Chi, a violence prevention campaign. This team of 25 at-risk youth from across the city worked together to create four youth-led and youth-driven campaigns to boost school safety through de-escalation training for both youth and police officers.

Currently, the students are developing an interactive de-escalation workbook for youth! It includes teachings from experts with activities like journaling, mindfulness, and reflection. There are also action items that can help youth externalize their socioemotional health in a way that betters our city. Students in True Star programs have plans to distribute workbooks to schools throughout the city!

Change Chi gave students the opportunity to practice critical thinking, persuasion, and leadership skills, as well as hone their digital design, outdoor advertising, and campaign development experience. The students were also honored to present their campaigns to True Star founders, State Rep LaShawn Ford, and Alderman Michael Scott from their communities! Your investment through True Star is developing the next generation of leaders our city needs. Thank you!
Jeremiah Griffith is a junior at Noble Academy and an aspiring sports journalist. Thanks to True Star, Jeremiah has the opportunity to start his career as a content creator and journalist today, as a 16-year-old! He has covered the WNBA Finals—where he met Chance the Rapper!—and was a broadcasting intern for Chicago House Athletic Club, a startup soccer league.

Mary Beth Johnson, Director of Community Engagement for Chicago House, raves about Jeremiah’s work: “His enthusiasm for sports journalism shined bright right from the first conversation. His detailed description of game analyses put the reader directly into the action, and his writing style captures the energy and emotion from the game. He also did an excellent job writing about the personal side of the sports industry—his interview with the House’s CEO pieced together a humble and inspiring story of the club’s foundation.”

Jeremiah says the True Star journalism work has been essential because “it enhances my skills—because I love writing—but I also love taking feedback from other professionals.” Opportunities like these make all the difference for developing a writer’s voice, connections, and body of work. Thanks for investing so that students like Jeremiah gain unforgettable and life-changing experiences in media and journalism!

“It was an honor and privilege to work with Jeremiah Griffith! We are so grateful for True Star connecting us with Jeremiah and helping him to become a leader in the next generation of content creators!”

—Mary Beth Johnson
Director of Community Engagement
Chicago House Athletic Club, Inaugural Fall 2021 Season
When Shaquille Roberts joined the True Star team as a journalist in high school, she remembers being shy due to a lack of confidence. But thanks to the programming you make possible, Shaquille found her confidence—and her future career—in filmmaking. Her film Lucky Number 7 was selected for screening during the Black Harvest Film Festival’s Made in Chicago Short Program at The Gene Siskel Film Center. What an exciting honor!

Shaquille’s success and creative contributions show the life-changing power of our work together at True Star. We can’t wait to see what she accomplishes next!

This past year dozens of volunteers invested time, energy, and social capital in True Star youth. One volunteer in particular leveraged her expertise to carve an exciting new internship path for the future. Shelby Banks launched Recruitment Reimagined, our new recruitment model that matches True Star youth with corporate partners for paid internships! Partners now have three well-defined options to choose from: micro-internships, internships, and consultancies. Thanks to Shelby’s leadership, Recruitment Reimagined embodies our talent pipeline vision in which True Star identifies emerging talent among our students, builds equity by connecting them to media experience, and trains them to create and deliver usable digital content solutions for our corporate partners.
COMMUNITY EVENTS, MUSIC, & ENTERTAINMENT

After more than a year of COVID precautions, our students were ready to get out—safely!—together for a day of fun.

Called From the ‘Go Fest, this day-long event was held in Douglass Park on August 28, 2021, and celebrated a wide array of young Black and Brown Chicago creatives. True Star students Xiah Bryant and Zuri Yearwood pitched the festival to True Star founders as a way to create a space that celebrates youth, honors their perspectives, and showcases their talents. Students were involved in every aspect of the festival’s development and execution. There was a concert with local performing artists, as well as a vendor fair for local youth entrepreneurs and interactive activities—all centered on promoting unity and connectedness among Chicago’s young creatives.

From the ‘Go Fest delivered exactly what the students wanted: a fun day to celebrate and showcase creativity and talent, together. True Star students worked together to make it happen and gained invaluable experience hosting a large-scale community event. Thanks for supporting their efforts and making it possible!

SPECIAL THANKS TO
SHAPING THE FUTURE

Partnering with True Star is a way to practically invest in Black and Latinx youth to shape a more equitable world. Through our Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Partnerships, your company can help our students make an even greater impact. True Star partners with Chicago-based companies and corporations to expand student access to digital content experiences and opportunities. Their investment is twofold:

1. Our partners give financially to support our unique industry-based model that invests in Black and brown youth across Chicago.

2. Our partners invest professionally to provide training and opportunities in digital content projects and experiences.

For partnership opportunities please contact
DeAnna McLeary-Sherman
deanna@truestar.life • (312) 498-8066

2021 TRUE STAR PARTNERS

We are grateful for the many businesses who invested financially and professionally in 2021! Your support was vital for our students’

Chicagoland Vaccine Partnership

Through Chicagoland Vaccine Partnership, True Star students and staff have convened to discuss strategies for increasing vaccination rates in Black and brown communities in Chicago. Our students were inspired by these discussions to launch their #Vax2NormalChi campaign (see story on page 10).

1871 Hackathon for Good

True Star was selected by State Farm to be the beneficiary of the Hackathon for Good that brought technologists together with True Star staff and students to determine how the organization could leverage technology to impact and provide more opportunities for young people.

State Farm was inspired to continue the project into the next phase, providing resources for the winning Hackathon team to develop a prototype app for the organization that allows it to reach more youth and gives them access to professionals and industry experts.

Visit 1871.com for more information.
INVESTING FOR THE FUTURE

The gifts you gave through True Star in 2021 made an immense difference in the lives of youth across Chicago! Because of your investment in their future, our students had access to many amazing real-world professional experiences that honed their skills and amplified their voices.

While the pandemic continued on, your steady support for our students didn’t waver. We are grateful for your partnership that inspires underserved youth to shape a brighter future for us all! Your support made True Star programming possible for 200 students in 2021, building on our 18-year legacy that has invested in more than 10,000 students over the years!

A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO SOCIAL VENTURE PARTNERS CHICAGO

For the past three years, Social Venture Partners has provided consulting and support in strategic planning to position True Star for maximum growth. It’s been an exciting collaboration!

SVP has been a key for connecting the directors to resources needed to grow the organization and make it more sustainable. True Star has grown significantly with the help of SVP Chicago. We can’t wait to see what’s next!
OUR TEAM
DeAnna McLeary-Sherman, Co-Founder & Director
Na-Tae’ Thompson, Co-Founder & Director
DeShaun Trig Adams, Video Production Instructor/Manager & Promotions Director
Marti Parham, Managing Editor
Henry Collins, Social Media & Brand Manager
Hector Hex Danniels, Digital Director
Sharon Jarmon, Broadcast/Podcast Instructor & Production Manager
Portia King, Marketing Instructor & Events Coordinator
DeAndre McCottry, Production Assistant

OUR BOARD
LaTonya Wilkens – President
Founder, Change Coaches and Best Selling Author of Leading Below the Surface
Giuseppe Commodaro - Treasurer
VP, Strategy and Business Development, PCNA
Udayan Das – Secretary
Associate Professor and Program Director, Computer Science at Saint Mary's College of California
Thomas McLeary
CEO, Endow Inc.
Michelle Cohen
Director Innovation & Acceleration, CME Group
Mia Nelson
Sr. Compensation Consultant, North America Operations at Amazon
David Nichols
Americas Leader, EY
Corey Richardson
VP, Fluent360
Steven Bayley
Planning Director, Norton Agency
True Star has taken an innovative approach to improving the lives of youth with on-the-job training programs enabling students to create, produce and work for a media company. Through the True Star Foundation, youth are put in leadership positions, their ideas are implemented, and they help to run the business, essentially fostering feelings of hope and the promise of a rewarding career.