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Sylvester Broome center serves Flint youth

JAY GREENE □ □ □

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SPECIAL REPORT: HEALTH CARE

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- [Sylvester Broome center serves Flint youth](#)
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When neurosurgeon Jawad Shah talks about giving back to the community of Flint, Exhibit A is the Sylvester Broome Empowerment Village.

Shah bought the 63,000-square-foot Broome building in 2015 for \$1. But he said helping young people in the community is the real challenge and at the core of what he wants to do as a physician and CEO of Insight Institute for Neurosurgery & Neuroscience.

"We are helping young people in Flint," he said. "It's the same thing as helping people with brain tumors, brain injuries and spinal cord injuries. It's part of our overall mission. So we're sitting in Flint and in Michigan and there's needs in the community. ... We shouldn't shy away from that."

Maryum Rasool, the center's executive director since June 2017, said the Broome Village was an elementary school built in 1921 that closed in the 1990s and later housed a variety of other businesses. It became the Broome Village in 1995 and then closed in 2012 until Shah bought it and restored it.

During the early days of the Flint water crisis, the village became one of the first water distribution sites. Shah and other doctors offered lead testing and a dermatology clinic was

located there to treat skin conditions.

At first, the Broome Village attracted about 30 children. By the end of 2018, word of mouth spread and there were nearly 500 children and 6,000 families participating in the village's seven after-school programs.

The nonprofit started with a budget of \$250,000 that is now nearly \$1 million, she said. Funding comes from grants, donations and leasing space to other organizations, including Wayne State University and the Flint Area Community Health and Environment Partnership.

The village is located in north Flint, one of the most financially challenged parts of the city. Shah knew he wanted to help children, then identified the building and the neighborhood he wanted to help.

"It needed lots of repairs," he said. "It was dilapidated and had drug dealers in the back. But it was a known entity in the city. Good work was done there in the past."

The Broome Village offers seven programs, including an after-school program, a sports academy, youth journalism, music and an adult literacy program. Also offered are nutrition services and classes on healthy eating and how to read food labels.

"We have kids who have went from failing to having all A's within a year," Rasool said. "We have kids now that understand concepts. They may not be a 4.0 student. But they go to school now, when before they just didn't want to bother with it because they didn't know what was going on."

Rasool said some kids have behavioral issues that are addressed in the after-school program.

"They say no one understands, no one listens. So sometimes we just give them an ear and those kids start to improve," she said.

Summer school has tracks that include music programs such as instruments or production, sports including gymnastics or soccer, art such as drawing or graphics, or academics like computer science, math or reading, she said.

The village challenges students to do better and they could lose their spots if they don't show progress, or what Rasool calls "success." Improvement in school could be getting better grades, or just showing up for classes.

"If they are not improving, if they're dropping school, then they can't continue. They must show success in some area," she said.

Last summer, more than 700 children enrolled for summer camp, Rasool said. But the village only had staffing for 300, she said.

Shah said the village also is intended to provide children with a safe zone and to revitalize the neighborhood and community.

"If they need a ride from your house, we will get them here," he said. "You need food, you need a backpack, you need pencils? The team here does what it takes to help them succeed."

Inline Play

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