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How Successfully Engaged Underserved Alumni Experienced Key Program Components of an After-School Music Program: A Multiple Case Study

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How Successfully Engaged Underserved Alumni Experienced Key Program  
Components of an After-School Music Program: A Multiple Case Study

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirement for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology

by

Joshua M. Sheltzer

Committee in charge:

Professor Andrés J. Consoli, Chair

Professor Heidi A. Zetzer

Professor Melissa L. Morgan Consoli

September 2020

The dissertation of Joshua M. Sheltzer is approved.

---

Melissa L. Morgan Consoli

---

Heidi A. Zetzer

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Andrés J. Consoli, Committee Chair

May 2020

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation could not have happened without the love, encouragement, and guidance from many wonderful people in my life. Much like the participants in the following study, I have felt the immense importance of my relationships with those who have supported me along the way. I would like to first thank my academic advisor and the chair of my dissertation committee, Andrés J. Consoli, for the countless hours poured into this dissertation, my growth and development as a researcher “righting wrongs” and a psychologist-in-training, and our non-stop conversations about motorcycles, philosophical quandaries, upside-down maps, and anything else we would tangentially blab about for way too long before getting back on topic. Your support over the past six years has defined my graduate school experience and beyond, and I am incredibly grateful for everything I have learned and experienced with you by my side. *Muchisimas gracias por todo.*

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Thank you as well to Notes for Notes and all those affiliated, including past and current staff, interviewed alumni, and the Boys & Girls Club. This study would have never been possible without your generously offered time, meeting spaces, perspectives, collaboration, and trust in us all these years, for which I am grateful. I hope this study has honored the voices that have contributed to its depth.

There are many more people to thank than possible in this space, so I will keep the following more concise. Thank you:

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To my band, Killer Kaya (and affiliated friends), for your friendship, love, music, life-perspective, and overall balance you afforded me during graduate school and while working on my dissertation. I could not have done it without you and your unwavering support and fun.

To my brother, Daniel, for always being there and motivating my pursuit of knowledge in order to prove you wrong when we have brotherly quarrels. And to my parents for teaching me to value education (and a balance of other important things) and accompanying me along the extended path that has led me to where I am today. I am eternally grateful for your guidance, love, wisdom, and support.

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# CURRICULUM VITAE OF JOSHUA M. SHELTER

May 2020

## EDUCATION

- 2014-2020 **University of California, Santa Barbara**, Santa Barbara, CA  
M.A. in Counseling Psychology, 2016  
Anticipated Ph.D. in Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology  
Emphasis in Counseling Psychology  
Faculty Advisor: Andrés J. Consoli, Ph.D.
- 2009-2013 **University of California, Berkeley**, Berkeley, CA  
B.A. in Psychology  
Minor in music

## PUBLICATIONS

*In preparation.*

Consoli, A. J., **Sheltzer, J. M.**, Romero Morales, A., Hidalgo, S., Nielsen, G., Vanegas Martínez, G., & Whaling, K. (in preparation). Access and utilization of mental health services by Mexicans/Mexican Americans seeking help in the public, specialty sector due to depression: Facilitative and impeding factors.

Consoli, A. J., Flores, I., & Sharma, H., & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (in preparation). Unity and diversity: A qualitative analysis of the multiple perspectives on psychology in Latin America.

*Published.*

Morgan-Consoli, M. L., Consoli, A. J., Hufana, A., Sanchez, A., Unzueta, E., Flores, I., Vázquez, M. D., **Sheltzer, J. M.**, & Casas, J. M. (2019). "I feel like we're going backwards:" Post-presidential election resilience in Latinx community members. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling and Psychology*, 10(2), 16-33.

**Sheltzer, J. M.**, & Consoli, A. J. (2019). Understanding the impact of an after-school music program with engaged underserved youth. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 47, 1364-1379. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22193>

**Sheltzer, J. M.**, & Consoli, A. J. (2017). The impact of an after-school music program with underserved youth: A transformative experience. *Conference proceedings, XXXVI Interamerican Congress of Psychology, Vol. 1*, 531-536. Mérida, Mexico: UNAM.

Sánchez, A., Hufana, A., Vázquez, M. D., Morgan Consoli, M. M., Consoli, A. J., Casas, J. M., Vanegas, G., **Sheltzer, J.**, Meza, D., & Unzueta, E. (2017, Spring). Post-Election

- reactions of Latinx community members in Santa Barbara. *UCSB Diversity Forum*, 11(2), 22.
- Beutler, L. E., Consoli, A. J., Lenore, S., & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (2017). Integrative and eclectic therapies in practice. In A. J. Consoli, L. E. Beutler, & B. Bongar, *Comprehensive textbook of psychotherapy: Theory and practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (pp. 205-220). Oxford University Press.
- Consoli, A. J., & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (2017). Personalismo. In A. E. Wenzel (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology* (p. 2523). Sage.
- Consoli, A. J., Morgan Consoli, M. L., Klappenbach, H., Romero Morales, A. & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (2015). Psychology in Latin America: Legacies and contributions - Part 3. *International Psychology Bulletin*, 19(2), 34-40.

### CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- Consoli, A. J., Flores, I., Sharma, H., & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (July, 2019). Unity and diversity: A qualitative analysis of the multiple perspectives on psychology in Latin America. Paper presented at the XXXVII Interamerican Society of Psychology Congress, Havana, Cuba.
- Vazquez, M., Sanchez, A., Flores, I., Hufana, A., Unzueta, E., **Sheltzer, J. M.**, Meza, D., Morgan-Consoli, M., Consoli, A., Casas, J. (August, 2018). Resilience in the Latina/o/x community post-Trump election: Themes and considerations. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, San Francisco, California.
- Sheltzer, J. M.**, Consoli, A. J. (July, 2017) The impact of an after-school music program with underserved youth: A transformative experience. Poster presented at the XXXVI Interamerican Society of Psychology Congress, Mérida, Mexico.
- Sheltzer, J. M.**, Consoli, A. J., Romero Morales, A., Whaling, K., & Vanegas, G. (August, 2016). Consumers' voices: Mexican-Americans accessing mental health services for depression. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Denver, Colorado.
- Consoli, A. J., Whaling, K., Vanegas, G., Romero Morales, A., & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (August, 2016). Alternative cultural paradigms in Latina/o psychology: What we know and what we need to know. In A. J. Consoli, & L. J. Myers, *Ethnic Psychological Associations expand psychological knowledge: Alternative cultural paradigms*. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Denver, Colorado.
- Consoli, A. J., **Sheltzer, J. M.**, & Romero Morales, A. (2015, August). *International faculty in the US: An ecological, culturally-grounded perspective of their experiences*. In A. Ciftci & L. Forrest (co-chairs), *International Faculty Development: Being in Academia*

in the US. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.

Consoli, A. J., Morgan Consoli, M., Torres, H., Romero Morales, A., & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (2015, August). *Unity and diversity: Multiple perspectives on psychology in Latin America*. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, Canada.

**Sheltzer, J. M.**, & Consoli, A. J. (2015, July). *Building bridges: The cultural value of personalismo in health and mental health care*. Presented at the XXXV Interamerican Congress of Psychology, Lima, Peru.

Consoli, A. J., Morgan Consoli, M., Klappenbach, H., Torres, H., Romero Morales, A., & **Sheltzer, J. M.** (2015, July). *Patrones temáticos en la psicología en Latinoamérica según el premio Psicólogo/a Interamericano/a de la SIP Rogelio Díaz Guerrero*. Presented at the XXXV Interamerican Congress of Psychology, Lima, Peru.

### OTHER PRESENTATIONS AND LECTURES

**Sheltzer, J. M.** (2016, November). *Exploring the Impact of an After-School Music Program with Underserved Children*. Presented at the annual Research Festival of the Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, University of California, Santa Barbara.

**Sheltzer, J. M.** (2016, January). *From values to skills: Self Determination Theory*. Lecture presented in Introduction to Educational and Vocational Guidance, University of California, Santa Barbara.

### CLINICAL WORK EXPERIENCE

2019-2020 (APA Accredited) Pre-Doctoral Internship at University of California, Santa Cruz Counseling and Psychological Services, August 2019-Current

- Conducted weekly intake assessments and designed treatment plans
- Provided brief psychotherapy to undergraduate and graduate university students experiencing a wide range of psychological disorders
- Co-led group therapy, including a grief and loss group, men's group, and a CBT-based anxiety workshop
- Covered weekly crisis intervention shifts
- Maintained a working relationship with the psychiatrists and physicians at Student Health Services
- Mentored undergraduate student workers in the Peer Education Program, which provides mental health outreach and education resources to university students
- Participated in outreach for dormitory resident assistants
- Served on several clinic committees, such as the multicultural committee and staff development committee
- Participated in weekly individual and group supervision
- Training Director: Maryjan Murphy, Ph.D.

2018-2019 Alcohol and Drug Program, University of California, Santa Barbara: Clinician

- Conducted intake assessments and provided referrals as needed
- Conducted group therapy sessions grounded in harm-reduction model of drug and alcohol use for college students
- Utilized mindfulness meditations, drug and alcohol psychoeducation, and motivational interviewing techniques
- Participated in weekly supervision

2016-2018 Santa Barbara City College Student Health and Wellness Services, Santa Barbara: Clinician

- Conducted intake assessments
- Provided individual therapy for diverse Santa Barbara City College students
- Participated in weekly supervision
- Collaborated with interdisciplinary team of nurses, psychiatrists, campus club organizers, and other community programs

2015-2016 Hosford Clinic, University of California, Santa Barbara: Clinician

- Conducted intake assessments
- Provided weekly mental health services to diverse community members
- Conducted weekly assessments
- Participated in weekly supervision
- Participated in outreach to educate public about mental health services
- Facilitated mindful eating group for youth

2013-2014 Tulare Youth Service Bureau: Youth and family counselor, case manager

- Conducted weekly intakes for new clients, developed treatment plans
- Provided mental health services for youth clients and their families, with an average case load of about 30 clients
- Conducted weekly crisis shift, managing high acuity cases and providing crisis interventions
- Mental health coordinator for Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy program at Happy Trails Riding Academy
- Provided mental health services for clients at two elementary schools and one middle school in Tulare County
- Applied for and received a \$500 grant to create a horticulture therapy program and site at Tulare city location
- Co-led group for youth sexual abuse survivors, as well as music group for other clients
- Conducted school and home visits and provided observational notes to assist with therapy
- Collaborated with an interdisciplinary team of psychiatrists, therapists, case managers, and school systems



## **OTHER WORK EXPERIENCE**

- 2014-2015 Hosford Clinic, University of California, Santa Barbara: Front desk
- Checked in clients and administered billing
  - Provided administrative assistance
  - Updated and stocked clinic forms
  - Received incoming calls for current and potential clients
  - Utilized Point-and-Click software
- 2012-2013 Research Assistant, Behavioral Psychology Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley
- Gathered data on fox squirrels in order to understand the cognitive processes underlying their behavior
  - Assisted with a project that aimed to test relative numerosity discrimination in squirrels
  - Designed and created a squirrel ramp to improve data collection efficiency

## **GRANTS & AWARDS**

- 2019 Hosford Research Award from the Ray E. Hosford Memorial Fund: \$760
- 2019 Block grant, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education: \$4,523
- 2019 CCSP Travel Award: \$1,350
- 2018 Graduate Division Dissertation Fellowship: \$8,000 + tuition/insurance funding
- 2017 Graduate Student Association Travel Award: \$200
- 2017 Block grant, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education: \$4,460
- 2017 CCSP Travel Award: \$685
- 2016 Block grant, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education: \$5,500
- 2016 Graduate Student Association Travel Award: \$200
- 2016 CCSP Travel Award: \$625
- 2015 Graduate Student Association Travel Award: \$200
- 2015 Block grant, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education: \$5,500
- 2014 Block grant, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, Gevirtz Graduate School of Education: \$13,746
- 2013 Horticulture Therapy Grant, Visalia Breakfast Rotary Club: \$500
- 2012 Cal Alumni Leadership Award: \$2,000

## **PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

- 2015-2020 Interamerican Society of Psychology (SIP)
- 2017-2018 Association for Psychological Science (APS)
- 2014-2016 American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS)
- 2014-2016 National Latinx Psychological Association (NLPA)

## TEACHING, EDITING, RESEARCH, AND LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES

- 2014-on      Research Assistant: Participate in and contribute to research team studying transnational collaborations, program evaluations, psychotherapy integration and training, systematic treatment selection, psychotherapy in Latin America, ethics and values in psychotherapy, Latinx values, access and utilization of mental health services by Latinxs within a social justice framework, and the development of a bilingual (English/Spanish) academic and mental health workforce. Tasks engaged in include the design and writing of grant proposals, ascertaining funding sources, conducting literature searches, transcribing qualitative interviews, analyzing data, writing manuscripts, and establishing and sustaining working relationships with the mental health community. Faculty leader: Andrés J. Consoli, Ph.D.
- 2019      Teaching Assistant for Introduction to Psychology 1, University of California, Santa Barbara, Winter quarter.
- 2018      Teaching Assistant for Introduction to Psychology 1, University of California, Santa Barbara, Winter quarter.
- 2017      Teaching Associate for CNCSP 110: Introduction to Educational and Vocational Guidance, University of California, Santa Barbara, Fall quarter: Created syllabus, wrote and graded exams, papers, and quizzes, created and taught lectures twice weekly, organized guest lectures and panels, held office hours and assisted over 60 students with class material and questions.
- 2017      Teaching Assistant for Introduction to Psychology 1, University of California, Santa Barbara, Spring quarter.
- 2017      Teaching Assistant for CNCSP 110: Introduction to Educational and Vocational Guidance, University of California, Santa Barbara, Winter quarter.
- 2017      Mentor with two undergraduate Psychology students who assist with research on effects of local music program.
- 2016      Teaching Assistant for Introduction to Psychology 1, University of California, Santa Barbara, Fall quarter.
- 2016      Teaching Assistant for Introduction to Psychology 1, University of California, Santa Barbara, Spring quarter.
- 2016      Teaching Assistant for Introduction to Psychology 1, University of California, Santa Barbara, Winter quarter.

- 2015-2016 Research assistant on grant for Access and Utilization of Mental Health Services by Mexicans/Mexican Americans: Council on Research and Instructional Resources, Academic Senate, University of California, Santa Barbara: Conducted qualitative analysis on semi-structured interviews; Poster presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Denver, Colorado.
- 2015-2016 Member of Climate Committee, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology: coordinated social and professional events for the department throughout the year, including interview day, orientation day, and the annual research festival, where students present results of their 2<sup>nd</sup> year projects.
- 2014-2015 Editing Comprehensive Textbook of Psychotherapy (Consoli, Beutler, & Bongar, 2017): Partial editing responsibilities on 6 chapters addressing theory and practice of psychotherapy.
- 2013 Editing Animal Cognition: Evolution, Behavior, and Cognition (Wynne & Udell, 2013): Partial editing responsibilities on all chapters.
- 2013 Discovering the Musical Mind (Bamberger, 2013): Musical figure creator and editor.
- 2013 Creator and Instructor for Music 98/198 Jazz Combo course, University of California, Berkeley.

## ABSTRACT

### How Successfully Engaged Underserved Alumni Experienced Key Program Components of an After-School Music Program: A Multiple Case Study

by

Joshua M. Sheltzer

As after-school programming has expanded in the U.S., there has been an increased empirical interest in understanding the impacts programs have on participating youth. Unfortunately, much of the research has focused on certain types of After School Programs (ASPs), primarily addressing tutoring and school-homework, and few have focused on underserved youth. This has resulted in a markedly limited understanding of non-academic ASPs, such as after-school music programs, and the underserved youth participating in them. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the experiences of seven successfully engaged underserved alumni who participated in Notes for Notes, an after-school music program. Building upon the findings from a prior study (Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019), the current study sought to gain a deeper understanding of how alumni experienced key program components, including meaningful relationships with staff, access to previously unavailable opportunities, program accessibility, physical and psychological safety, and freedom of expression. Analysis indicated a synergistic relationship between key elements of the program, staff characteristics, and alumni involvement, which resulted in a successful program experience

as described by alumni. Specifically, alumni lauded several elements of the program such as the availability of free resources, the collaboration with the Boys & Girls club, and the safe and practical location. Affirming and supportive relationships with staff were considered crucial by alumni, especially in creating feelings of safety and acceptance. Additionally, engaged alumni described how they overcame barriers to accessibility, benefited from freedom of expression, took advantage of novel opportunities, and were motivated to “pay it forward.” A discussion of the implications of the findings, limitations of the study, and future directions is included.

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## **Chapter I: Study Rationale and Purpose**

### **Rationale for the Study**

After-school programming has been increasing in the U.S., with a recent estimated involvement of over 10 million youth, up from 6 million in 2001 (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; De Kanter, 2001). This 66% growth in after-school program participation is even more noteworthy considering the 2.1% decrease in the population of U.S. citizens ages 5-19 during the same time frame (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Interest in after-school programs (ASPs) significantly rose following reports that juvenile crime peaked between 2 and 6 pm on school days, which coincides with the time between the end of school for many children and youth, up until when many parents arrive home from work (Gottfredson et al., 2001). Meanwhile, the parental demand for supervised care for their children during this time has grown, due in part to increasing numbers of parents entering the workforce (Apsler, 2009; Kane, 2004). To meet this need, and over the past two decades, considerable funds have become available through federal, state, local, and private sources. Most notably, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 led to the creation of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers, in order to provide before- and after-school programs to benefit low performing youth living in high-poverty areas (Dynarski et al., 2004). Consequently, government funding increased considerably from \$40 million dollars in 1998 to approximately \$1 billion dollars in 2002; this level of annual funding, estimated at \$1 billion dollars, has remained steady through 2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

The rising popularity of ASPs has led to increased interest in the benefits and outcomes of such programs, especially considering the cost of operations, with one review calculating an annual per-child cost range between \$449 to \$7,160 (Lind et al., 2006). This



wide spread can be attributed to several factors including differing program characteristics, varied methodology for calculating costs, and whether start-up, operating, and system-building costs are included in estimates. Nevertheless, the cost associated with developing and running ASPs has contributed to increased interest in their benefits and outcomes. Evaluation research has generally supported the notion that ASPs can promote various positive outcomes in different domains, such as psychological improvement (e.g., increased concentration and regulation skills), academic gains (e.g., improved school attendance, higher scores in standardized tests, enhanced reading abilities), and behavioral changes (e.g., reductions in behavioral problems) (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Durlak et al., 2010; Lauer et al., 2006; Riggs, et al., 2010; Vandell, 2013). However, ASP evaluations, including meta-analyses, have raised concerns that much of the extant research presented significant methodological shortcomings and selection biases, suggesting that many results may lack validity (Apsler, 2009; Kremer et al., 2015). The authors of these reviews have called for increased statistical rigor and efforts to reduce or eliminate potential bias (such as selection bias) in future studies by utilizing larger sample sizes, adequate control groups, and more rigorous designs.

Despite the contention related to program evaluation rigor, there is consensus within the scientific and professional literature on the positive impact of ASPs. Meta-analyses and program evaluations indicate that ASPs *can* facilitate the achievement of important developmental and learning outcomes, yet not all programs are designed and executed in a way that achieves these results (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Durlak et al., 2010). Specifically, results from ASP studies suggest that there are crucial aspects to consider when attempting to define success in programs, such as program quality and characteristics (e.g., staff

qualifications and training), and participant engagement, rather than simply program attendance (Cross et al., 2010; Hirsch et al., 2010; Shernoff, 2010). In 2002, the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine released a consensus report about community programs, including after-school programs, identifying eight program features important in supporting positive youth development—physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for youth empowerment and efficacy, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts. These eight program features have remained as the gold standard for evaluating ASPs and have served as the basis for various measures of program quality (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Yohalem & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2010). The consensus report also underscored the value of providing different types of program opportunities that appeal to and meet the needs of diverse youth, particularly for those who are underserved. Additionally, the authors of the report expressed interest in better understanding programs for youth who have the greatest need coupled with the fewest resources, since their review of the literature revealed a paucity of research that addresses the kinds of programs that would be particularly beneficial for underserved youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Riggs and collaborators (Riggs et al., 2010) have also called attention to the insufficient amount of ASP research focused on youth in need, noting that much of the available literature has evaluated the effects of participation in ASPs in general, often overlooking demographics and other characteristics such as the diversity of program participants as well as issues related to program accessibility. Some researchers have focused on program effects for underserved youth who are at-risk (e.g., Kremer et al., 2015; Lauer et

al., 2006) or low-income (Sanderson & Richards, 2010). However, a paucity of research on ASPs serving underserved populations remains.

The limited amount of research addressing underserved youth becomes even more noticeable when the topic is narrowed down to specific types of programs. For example, within the literature among ASPs involving music, there are few studies that focus on how underserved participants experience these programs. In fact, a search using PsycINFO, the electronic database of the American Psychological Association, that included the keywords “after-school program” and “music” and (underserved OR low-income OR at-risk OR marginalized) that was conducted on April 12, 2020 yielded only one partially relevant result that examined student musical preferences and pre-service teacher reflections related to an after-school music program for at-risk children (Ward-Steinman, 2006). Findings from this study indicated that pre-service teachers, who were undergraduate education majors, considered themselves not only a positive force as musical mentors, but also successful in making the experience enjoyable, challenging, and even extraordinary for the at-risk children involved in a 6-week after-school music program. In addition, Ward-Steinmann (2006) found that the children involved in the program seemed to prefer music that reflected their ethnic background. Beyond this single study, the gap in the literature underscores a need for further studies addressing underserved participants in after-school music programs (ASMPs), as they are underserved not only on their most basic needs but also on all other needs, including access to artistic expression and research.

The focus of this study is on one of the many ASMPs throughout the nation that serve this population. The particular ASMP, Notes for Notes (N4N), is a non-profit organization that has partnered with another organization, the Boys & Girls Club, which is where the

programming takes place. The Boys & Girls Club is a national organization of local chapters which provide after-school programs for youth, with the mission of “enabling all young people, especially those who may need it most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, and responsible citizens” (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2018).

N4N created and runs after-school programs that provide free music resources for youth, including music lessons, workshops, the opportunity to sing songs into a microphone over prerecorded backing tracks (i.e., karaoke), recording and musical engineering instruction, access to musical and recording equipment, and more. The program’s mission is focused on creating collaborative relationships through music and promoting “freedom of expression and respect for creativity” (Notes for Notes, 2020). N4N was selected due to its national reputation and visibility, its location proximity to the researchers (the program started in Santa Barbara yet is now in 11 states and 21 locations), N4N staff interest in learning more about the program’s impact and their willingness to collaborate, the program’s focus on music, and its work with underserved, local communities accessed through the Boys & Girls Club. Since its creation in 2007, the organization had not had the opportunity to examine systematically the impact it has had on its members and had relied on anecdotal evidence to gauge such impact. Addressing this, through the collaborative relationship established with N4N over the last four years, Sheltzer & Consoli (2019) explored how past members (alumni) experienced the program. This dissertation is a continuation of the partnership, building off the foundational results from the initial study.

Sheltzer & Consoli (2019) conducted the initial qualitative study to explore the impacts of Notes for Notes on program alumni and the role of staff members. Results indicated that the program impacted interviewed members in several positive ways: Alumni

participants reflected on their experiences as a way to make new friends, develop a sense of identity, keep them out of trouble after school, improve their academics, and cope with stress. Specifically related to music, participants noted that they had developed new skills (such as learning how to play instruments or operate recording equipment), learned how to perform in front of others, expanded their musical repertoire and knowledge, and developed passion and perseverance. Participants underscored consistency, opportunity, exposure, and support/instruction as meaningful program characteristics that may have facilitated such impact (Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019).

Staff members were also interviewed, providing insight into their motivations for working at N4N, as well as their recognition of positive program characteristics, including consistency and safety, positive communication, exposure and exploration, and freedom of expression. Although not all eight desirable, gold standard program features identified in the 2002 consensus report were found in the study, the report also suggests that, because community programs for youth differ in their objectives, design, approach, and focus, no single program can incorporate all of the features of positive developmental settings (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The results of the initial study, however, aligned most closely with three of the eight program features: physical and psychological safety, supportive relationships, and opportunities for skill building, with an additional program-specific focus on freedom of expression (Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019).

### **Purpose of the Current Study**

Following the results of the initial study (Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019) and congruent with qualitative goals and design, the current study aims to expand and deepen the understanding of some of the most meaningful findings from the prior study, focusing on

several cases of underserved alumni and their retrospective experiences about the key components of the program associated with an overall successful experience. More specifically, it aims to expand the understanding of how N4N alumni were impacted by meaningful relationships with staff, access to previously unavailable opportunities, consistent accessibility, physical and psychological safety provided by the program, and freedom of expression throughout the program. In light of the dearth of literature on underserved youth in ASMPs, this study aims to contribute toward the closing of that gap, providing insight into their unique experiences.

An additional motivation informing this study is to contribute to the literature aligned with the field of counseling psychology. Using a social justice framework, this study aims to engage in a community partnership that furthers the ongoing, horizontal collaboration with N4N, striving for mutual growth throughout the process as learning partners. Furthermore, the intention of this study is to explore topics such as positive youth development, issues of accessibility, physical and psychological safety, and opportunities for underserved youth, all of which are congruent with the goals and values of counseling psychology.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How did participant relationships with staff members influence their experience at N4N?
- 2) How did the opportunities made available by N4N contribute to participants' overall experience in the program?
- 3) How did certain program characteristics (i.e., physical and psychological safety, accessibility) impact participants' experience at N4N?

- 4) How did participants experience freedom of expression at N4N, and how did that experience compare to participants' experiences of freedom of expression in school and other ASPs (other than N4N, if any)?

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This section summarizes the findings of the initial N4N study and then frames the dissertation in the context of two theories, Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Additionally, literature is reviewed in relation to each of the four research questions, underscoring relevant studies on supportive relationships with staff, freedom of expression, markedly limited opportunities for underserved youth, physical and psychological safety, and the impact of music in and out of ASPs. Gaps in the literature are identified, and suggestions are made as to how this study is going to contribute to the dearth of knowledge related to the experiences of underserved ASMP participants.

Throughout the literature reviewed in the following section, several terms are used to describe the relative lack of privilege for participants in schools, ASPs, and other youth organizations. Descriptors such as underserved, marginalized, at-risk, low-income, disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and vulnerable are used in numerous publications. The abundance of terms to describe these youth can be confusing since, in many ways, the terms are related and used interchangeably at times. For the purpose of this study, and to avoid further confusion and maintain consistency with the initial N4N study and the terminology used by the Boys & Girls Clubs, the term underserved will be used to describe N4N participants and alumni who may benefit the most from the resources offered by N4N. The Boys & Girls Clubs, where N4N programming takes place, describe the demographic of club members as underserved, with 56% of their members qualifying for free or reduced-price school lunches. This number is compared to 52% of public school students nationally, demonstrating that N4N may provide programming to, on average, a higher percentage of



underserved youth than public schools (Boys & Girls Clubs of America, 2017; National Center of Education Statistics, 2017).

### **Initial Study Findings**

The initial study (Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019) sought to document and understand the impact of N4N through 16 semi-structured interviews, including 11 alumni and 5 staff members. Interviews were guided by 23 questions for alumni and 11 for staff interviews designed to help all participants explore and reflect upon their experiences in the program. Responses were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using an inductive form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), resulting in two thematic maps that identified and conceptualized the influence and impact of the program on the participants, as well as staff motivation and recognition of program characteristics. According to the alumni who participated in the study, the program's multiple positive characteristics (e.g., consistency, opportunity) had an impact on a personal, relational, and musical level that helped explain its overall value. Similarly, the staff who participated in the study identified certain program characteristics (e.g., consistency, freedom of expression) and their own motivation for working at N4N as most salient.

Considerable overlap of positive program characteristics was expressed through the accounts of these staff and alumni, including consistent program attendance and reliable presence and support from staff, freedom of musical and creative expression, increased exposure to instruments and music genres, and expansive opportunities (e.g., opportunity to run a show). According to these alumni, the program impacted various domains involving academic improvement, social skills, emotional coping, prevention of unsafe activity, and identity development. In addition, these alumni identified how the program favorably

impacted their musical knowledge and skills and fostered a passion for music. The themes derived from staff participants also provided insight into their motivation for working at N4N. The staff participants appreciated the program meeting their basic employment needs, yet even more important to their motivation were the specific meaningful qualities of the job, such as working in a musical environment, acting as a positive role model, witnessing the outcome and impact of the program on participants, and being involved in the community. The results of this initial study have helped generate more focused questions in the current study, aimed at deepening the understanding of the key components of N4N according to underserved alumni, guided as well by the literature on after-school programming and their quality.

### **Positive Youth Development**

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is frequently cited as a useful framework to better understand the processes involved in successful ASPs (Lerner, 2004; Ward & Parker, 2013). In addition, PYD literature aligns with a strengths-based—rather than deficit-based—perspective that is part of the growing positive psychology movement within the field of counseling psychology (Lopez, 2004; Smith, 2006). It should be noted that several overlapping themes can be found when comparing PYD literature to the results of the initial N4N study. Consequently, the present study is framed through a PYD perspective. PYD is a strengths-based developmental approach that adheres to the notion that all children have strengths and assets that are to be promoted and nurtured rather than deficits that require fixing (Ward & Parker, 2013).

Derived from developmental systems theory, PYD purportedly emerges when the potential plasticity of human development is aligned with developmental assets, and it is said

to be cultivated through the promotion of five constructs typically referred as the Five Cs: competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring (Lerner et al., 2005). Lerner (2004) emphasizes that programs are most likely to result in the development of these Five Cs when they involve positive and sustained adult-youth relationships, youth skill-building activities, and opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of community-based activities. This assertion is consistent with the community-based programs consensus report released by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine in 2002, which identified the eight previously listed program features important in supporting positive youth development—physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for youth empowerment and efficacy, opportunities for skill building, and integration of family, school, and community efforts.

Comparing the literature on PYD with the results from the initial N4N study reveals significant overlap; the four program features that stand out as congruent with both sources include supportive relationships, opportunities provided by the program, accessibility and physical and psychological safety, and freedom of expression. The latter feature is specific to N4N in many ways, yet PYD and self-determination theory (SDT) literature support the notion of internal motivation and freedom of expression as well. A more comprehensive understanding of SDT and the research that has been conducted on it can help explain how its components, especially autonomy, are relevant to this dissertation.

### **Self Determination Theory**

Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory proposes that human behavior is motivated by three essential needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—all of which

are important contributors to intrinsic drive and psychological health. The theory is particularly relevant to N4N and complementary to PYD, with several core values that overlap with N4N key program components and PYD constructs. For example, at the core of autonomy exists the ability to make intrinsically-driven choices, which was recognized by alumni as characteristic of N4N through the themes of freedom of expression and opportunities (Sheltzer & Consoli, 2019). Additionally, competence, one of the essential needs of SDT, overlaps directly with the construct of competence and similarly with the construct of skill building, representing two of the 5Cs of PYD. Furthermore, SDT's essential need of relatedness correlates to PYD's construct of supportive relationships. It should also be noted that PYD and SDT literature are often included together in ASP research.

SDT has been studied in many settings, including after-school programs. For example, SDT was applied in an after-school setting with Latinx middle school students (Niehaus et al., 2012). These researchers found that intrinsic motivation was positively associated with students' GPAs and that self-efficacy was a positive predictor of school attendance and standardized math scores. SDT has also been applied in a music setting (MacIntyre et al., 2017). These researchers found that intrinsic motivation created a feedback loop: desire to learn led to increased effort at learning and practicing, which led to development of perceived competence, which then reflected back into an increased desire to learn. Overall, SDT may help explain how some of the components of N4N may be contributing to positive outcomes, especially with respect to freedom of expression and its relation to autonomy.

### **Freedom of Expression**

Notes for Notes' mission statement declares that "it is the freedom of expression and respect for the creativity of others that drives an open environment in the studio. Music inspires connection and collaboration, and it is through these relationships that we can make the most impact." (Notes for Notes, 2017). Research on SDT has supported these aspirational statements, suggesting that adults who are overcontrolling undermine motivation and learning and that adults are most effective when they support youths' experience of ownership and agency (Ryan & Deci, 2003). N4N's emphasis on combining collaboration with freedom of expression exemplifies how Ryan and Deci's findings can be implemented to support youth intrinsic motivation; if youth are allowed to express themselves freely yet with guidance, it follows that they are more likely to connect to the music and remain motivated, a notion that aligns with research on PYD. The goal of PYD, according to Larson (2006), is for youths' own internal motivation (and other built-in positive dispositions) to be activated. Larson (2006) commented that parents, teachers, policy makers, and mentors tend to want to control and mold youth; however, he argued that the "harder challenge" is to support and enable youth to control and motivate themselves and help them mobilize their "often-dormant" potentials for growth (p. 678).

There are several documented benefits of freedom of expression and choice in ASPs. Grossman et al. (2009) found many positive outcomes associated with ASPs that allow youth to tailor tasks to their own interests, involve youth in the development of program rules, and enable youth to participate in decision making. Results suggest that youth in these programs reported experiencing improved feelings of belonging, enjoyment, and engagement, in addition to increased self-confidence.

In an effort to further explain the complexities related to youth freedom and choice, Larson (2006) highlighted some important qualifiers to the advantages of freedom and intrinsic motivation in the positive development of youth. Larson (2006) found that in situations where an adult advisor took control over youth activities, youth were more likely to lose a sense of ownership. As a result, motivation decreased and youth disengaged. However, when the advisors allowed youth complete autonomy in the activity, the work was often off track or stalled, leading to declining motivation as well. The dilemma appeared to be that creating too much structure or direction by adults can lead to a loss of youth ownership, while supporting youth ownership as the top priority can mean that youth are not being challenged to grow and develop. Larson's (2006) solution to this paradox was to clearly understand the determinants of youth agency; the tension is not between youth control versus adult control. Rather, it is between youths' experience of a *sense* of ownership and their experience of being challenged and encouraged to stay on track. If a relationship of trust has been built between youth and their adult mentors, Larson (2006) asserted that it is possible for adults to support youths' experience of agency while simultaneously providing input that challenges them and keeps them engaged. Consequently, it is important to consider that freedom and autonomy have their limits and that some structure can be beneficial, especially when coming from trusted staff.

### **Supportive Relationships with Staff**

Rhodes (2004) highlighted the unique advantages of ASP staff who are afforded opportunities to engage with youth in a less formal and constrained way than teachers and parents, increasing the chance of forming close bonds. In addition, research has shown that ASP staff are often relatively young and from the same community that they serve, which

makes them well positioned to connect with members (Hirsch et al., 2002). Furthermore, Hirsch et al. (2000) analyzed youths' relationships with staff in several Boys & Girls Clubs and concluded that staff were able to offer a unique form of support that resembled a balance between the caring and love received from extended family, when available, and the more specific targeted skills received from teachers.

The type of relationships formed between staff and members at N4N can be considered informal mentoring—defined as developing an important relationship with a non-parental adult—which has been associated with many positive outcomes (McDonald et al., 2007). McDonald et al. (2007) found that the development of informal mentoring relationships is linked to higher rates of full-time employment for youth who are transitioning into adulthood. Additionally, in a four-year longitudinal study, findings indicated that informal mentorships led to enhanced personal and social development in underserved youth, as well as allowed for informal education opportunities (Sanford et al., 2010). Studies show that mentoring relationships are most likely to promote positive outcomes and avoid harm when they are close, consistent, and enduring, and it has been suggested that ASPs offer an ideal platform for such relationships to form (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

Another important characteristic of successful mentoring relationships in ASPs is the involvement of mutual trust. Once a relationship has developed, ASP participants typically begin to see their mentor as someone who cares about them and on whom they can rely (Keller, 2005). In light of the considerable amount of research highlighting the importance of participant-staff relationships, it is important to pay close attention to this dynamic when understanding the impact of an ASP. In fact, in a study evaluating implementation quality

and positive experiences in after-school programs, Cross et al. (2010) concluded that staff quality might be the single most important characteristic of program success. This assertion is supported by further research on the importance of staff interactions with ASP participants. For example, one study found that supportive relationships with staff members increase enjoyment and engagement in ASPs and contribute to feelings of achievement (Grossman et al., 2007). Another study of middle school students found that supportive relationships with staff increased feelings of self-efficacy (Walker & Arbreton, 2004).

It is important to consider how relationships with ASP staff may differ from relationships with school teachers. In fact, researchers found that youth report higher levels of relational trust with Boys & Girls Club staff compared with teachers in the school setting, articulate increased feelings of community when they feel respected, and describe a greater sense of connection in the after-school setting compared to the school setting (Deutsch & Jones, 2008; Jones & Deutsch, 2011). Overall, the general consensus is that ASP outcomes improve when interactions between youth and after-school staff members are experienced as mutually respectful and, more generally, positive (Grossman et al., 2009).

### **Underserved Youth and Markedly Limited Opportunities**

Many ASPs aim to provide programs for underserved youth. Research suggests that, in comparison with middle-income children, low-income children are more in need of after-school opportunities and more likely to benefit from them (Miller, 2003). Specifically, low-income children are less likely to have an after-school caregiver at home, and their neighborhoods tend to be less safe than those of middle-income children, suggesting a greater need for accessible ASPs and resulting in higher demand for such programs (Kremer et al., 2015; Lauer et al., 2006). However, meta-analyses that have focused on the effects of ASPs



targeting at-risk youth have obtained varied results. For example, Lauer et al. (2006) found small but significant positive effects of out-of-school-time programs for reading and math achievement, with larger effects for programs with specific characteristics like tutoring in reading. In contrast, in a more recent meta-analysis including data from over 109,000 students, Kremer et al. (2015) found small and non-significant effects for increased attendance and decreased externalizing behaviors for at-risk youth.

Despite the mixed academic and behavioral results, underserved youth can benefit more directly from ASPs through exposure to new opportunities that may have previously been inaccessible due to financial barriers. Low-income families may have markedly limited financial resources to fund opportunities for youth to participate in activities, particularly those that require the purchasing of an instrument or acquiring expensive recording equipment and software. ASPs that provide these resources and opportunities can serve these populations by offering access to equipment, instruction, and outlets to demonstrate newly-acquired skills.

Although most ASPs offer homework assistance or academic activities (85%), nearly all programs also offer recreational components (92%), such as sports or arts (Dynarski et al., 2004). These programs broaden opportunities for underserved youth who may otherwise lack affordable access to such activities and skills. However, even when programs are offered without cost in low socioeconomic status neighborhoods, youth who typically engage in the programs are likely to be prosocially-oriented and have parents who are more likely to seek such activities for their children; in other words, youth who might benefit the most from ASPs may be the least likely to access them (Bender et al., 2011; Forrest-Bank et al., 2016).

Since youth can only benefit from ASPs if they participate in them, it is important for after-school providers to offer attractive programs to engage all youth. Arts programming can serve as an exciting alternative to academic support or recreational activities (Forrest-Bank et al., 2016).

### **Music and the Arts After School**

Literature suggests that arts programming may serve as a protective resource that promotes outcomes characteristic of PYD (Forrest-Bank et al., 2016). ASPs with a focus on the arts have the potential to help youth increase awareness of themselves and others and develop improved coping with stress and trauma. In fact, expression through art has been shown to provide a mechanism for exchanging knowledge about cultures and celebrating diversity (Goicoechea et al., 2014). In addition, youth from low-income neighborhoods who may have incurred physical or emotional trauma as a result of exposure to risk factors might benefit from involvement in art expression programs (Forrest-Bank et al., 2016). For example, one study found that low-income inner-city fourth graders—involved in a theater-based youth violence prevention program—showed significant improvements on ratings of aggressive behaviors, prosocial behaviors, and academic engagement compared to matched controls (Kisiel et al., 2006).

With respect to ASPs specifically focused on music, the literature is limited. However, some researchers have started to focus on this understudied topic. For example, one study measured the effects of a structured arts program (that included music, among other arts) in a low-income community and found that participants showed significant gains in artistic and social skills, in addition to significant reductions in emotional problems (Wright et al., 2006). Another study attempted to integrate social-emotional activities into the

curriculum of an ASMP and found promise in their model for mental health promotion for urban youth (Hedemann & Frazier, 2017). Furthermore, researchers have partnered with a similar program to N4N, called Harmony Project, and they have conducted studies measuring various impacts of the program on literacy skills, auditory learning, and neuroplasticity for at-risk and disadvantaged children (Kraus, Hornickel, Strait et al., 2014; Kraus et al., 2014; Slater et al., 2014). Their findings are promising; however, all of their studies are quantitative, and absent from their findings is a deeper understanding of participants' experiences in the programs, which this dissertation seeks to address.

The benefits of music involvement, apart from ASPs, have also been studied. Researchers have linked music participation among the youth to higher rates of college enrollment and achievement, improved grades, and increased school and civic engagement, when compared to those not involved in music (Catterall et al., 2012). Additionally, Saarikallio and Erkkila (2007) found that music can promote emotional self-regulation and offer adolescents resources for increasing and restoring well-being. Furthermore, music has been shown to reduce pain and anxiety in children during medical procedures (Klassen et al., 2008). Overall, evidence suggests that involvement in music can be beneficial for many youth, though the precise mechanisms of how those benefits come about, especially in after-school environments, are not fully understood. This study aims to add depth to the knowledge of how involvement in N4N, an ASP focused on music, has been experienced by underserved alumni, with a particular focus on participant relationships with staff, the impact of program opportunities, safety and accessibility, and freedom of expression.

### **Physical and Psychological Safety and Accessibility**

Results from the initial N4N study indicated that safety was an important part of participants' experiences. Alumni and staff participants lauded the program's ability to provide a safe space for members to go after school, both in the sense of having a physical location that was considered out of harm's way and accessible, as well as feeling safe with staff and other members. Eccles and Gootman (2002) stated that "one of the fundamental reasons for community programming for youth is to provide safe places for them to go" (p. 193). According to the Eccles and Gootman (2002), this is achieved when programs have clear and consistent rules, expectations, and boundaries, as well as practices that increase safe peer group interaction and decrease unsafe or confrontational peer interactions. Eccles and Gootman (2002) concluded that physical and psychological safety are prerequisites to positive development.

Pelcher and Rajan's (2016) systematic literature review on ASP implementation in urban environments supplements the previous assertions. They found that one of the most important barriers to adolescent youth engagement in ASPs was accessibility. Having sufficient space and safe transportation to and from ASPs is a challenge for many programs, and Pelcher and Rajan (2016) underscored the importance of locating programs in areas that are easily and safely accessed by youth. ASPs are not always located close to members' homes, and youth sometimes cannot travel safely at certain times of day due to crime, especially if they do not have someone who can transport them to and from program sites (Pelcher & Rajan, 2016).

A byproduct of accessible programs is increased ASP participation, and in turn, increased youth supervision and opportunities for meaningful guidance after school. A survey of over 600 California adolescents aged 12-17 found that those left unsupervised three

or more days per week were twice as likely to hang out with gang members, three times as likely to be engaged in criminal behavior, and more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs (National Institute on Out-Of-School Time, 2009). Evans and Leung (2012) assert that quality ASPs can be part of the solution to help youth who are vulnerable during after-school hours, and public opinion echoes this sentiment. In a survey of after-school program participants and programs, 73% of parents and 83% of participants agreed that after-school program attendance “can help reduce the likelihood that youth will engage in risky behaviors, such as commit a crime, use drugs, or become a teen parent (Afterschool Alliance, 2014, p. 11). In addition, many ASPs acknowledge safety and supervision as their primary objective: in a survey of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center administrators, 66% of administrators cited having a “safe, supervised after-school environment” as a primary objective for their program (Dynarski et al., 2004). Overall, evidence supports safety and accessibility as important aspects of ASPs, and once established, programs may be able to focus on other aspects of positive youth development, such as providing novel opportunities to learn skills and form meaningful relationships with staff.

## **Summary**

Results from the initial N4N study provide a foundation for understanding the impacts of the program on the alumni interviewed. From these findings, several key program components stood out as instrumental in providing program alumni with a successful experience, such as having supportive relationships with staff, experiencing freedom of expression, having access to previously unavailable opportunities, and feeling that the program is safe and accessible. The results of the initial study are supported by theories such as PYD and SDT, which suggest that many of these components are aligned with positive

development and psychological health. In addition, each of these components have been studied and identified as important markers of quality ASPs. Furthermore, they significantly overlap with the consensus report released by the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine that has been used as the gold standard for evaluating ASPs (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). However, despite the support from the literature on these key components, there remains a dearth of literature on ASMPs specifically, along with the underserved populations that access them. For example, Riggs et al. (2010) underscore the lack of studies addressing program accessibility, as well as studies considering the demographics of ASP participants. Additionally, although some researchers have focused on underserved youth in arts programs, a search for literature addressing ASPs that focus exclusively on music with this population yields markedly limited results. Amid the studies that do focus on this topic, those that have been identified are exclusively quantitative and tend to lack depth in understanding participants' experiences in the programs. This dissertation aims to contribute toward closing this gap, deepening the understanding of how successfully engaged underserved alumni from an ASMP experienced the key program components that a previous study and the literature associated with an overall successful experience.

## Chapter III: Methods

### Research Design

This dissertation utilized a multiple case study design. A multiple case study is a research design used to closely examine several cases linked together, where one small collection of people, activities, policies, strengths, problems, or relationships is studied in detail (Stake, 2006). In multiple case studies, analysis within and across cases is conducted, and themes arise associated with the cases as a whole, or the “quintain” (Stake, 2006, p.6). Stake (2006) defines a quintain (pronounced kwɪn'tɒn) as an object or condition to be studied—a word that represents the collective target. In this study, the quintain is underserved N4N alumni who were considered successfully engaged by the staff. According to Stake (2006), multiple case research starts with the quintain, with the goal of increased understanding through the study of some of its single cases. Studying the similarities and differences among the cases helps us understand the *quintain* as a whole and in its diversity, yet it is important to make the distinction between better understanding the quintain and generalizing findings to the source of the quintain or other similar sources (e.g., programs or organizations), the latter being something not supported by the research design.

There are two types of case studies identified by Stake (1995, 2005)—intrinsic and instrumental. An intrinsic case study is undertaken to get a better understanding of one particular case because that case is of specific interest. In contrast, an instrumental case study is used to provide insight into what Stake calls an “issue,” or a research question (2005, p. 445). In this type of study, the case is of secondary interest, and it plays a supportive role to facilitate understanding of an external interest. When a number of cases are jointly studied to investigate research questions, Stake (2005) calls this a multiple or collective case study,

which is inherently considered instrumental due to the absence of specific interest in one case. This distinction between intrinsic and instrumental is important to make, since it determines which types of methods would be best for the study (Stake, 1995). In light of the research questions and aims of the proposed dissertation, I utilized an instrumental multiple case study.

### **Research Paradigm**

The analyses of the data are based on a social constructivist paradigm, which holds that much of reality is socially constructed, subjective, and built through consensus and interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This paradigm aligns with Stake's (1995, 2005, 2006) approach to conducting multiple case studies. On the subject of epistemology for his approach to case studies, Stake (2006) emphasizes that "qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation," which is "expected to shape the activity, as well as the experiencing and the interpretation of the activity" (p. 2). Stake (1995) argues that "most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered (p. 99). He conceives of the qualitative case study researcher as an interpreter, and gatherer of interpretations, who then reports their rendition of the constructed reality they gather through their investigation (Yazan, 2015). Consequently, I chose to adopt the social constructivist approach as it honors multiple aspects of subjective realities that can be co-created with others, and I see the importance of context, shared meaning-making, and the complexities of the participant-researcher relationship as vital components of understanding those realities. Rather than searching for a single truth, I aimed to better understand the quintain through an iterative process, working together with the participants in the study, the staff at N4N, and an



experienced faculty member to gain insight into the proposed research questions.

Consequently, as a co-creator of knowledge, it is important for me to position myself within the study.

### **Positionality**

Emphasizing the importance of cultural awareness and self-reflection in qualitative research, Fassinger and Morrow (2013) call for researchers to examine their assumptions and biases, as well as make their statuses and standpoints explicit. Consistent with this stance, as the lead researcher, I find it important to reflect on my positionality and expectations, beliefs, and values related to the study. I am a Caucasian male counseling psychology doctoral student, who is also a musician, who participated in ASPs as an adolescent, and who has both an insider and outsider perspective in relation to Notes for Notes.

I perceive myself as an insider due to my long-standing relationship with Notes for Notes throughout graduate school (i.e., over five years), my participation and interaction with alumni in interviews conducted in the first study, the proximity of my age in relation to alumni participants, and my identity as a musician. As an insider, I hoped to gain acceptance from my participants, with a level of trust and openness already established that may not have been there otherwise (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, I also recognize that there are potential drawbacks to the insider status, such as role conflict or role confusion (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), and ways to mitigate them. For example, to avoid role confusion, I needed to be careful not to project my own experience as a musician and former ASP participant onto the alumni.

I also perceive myself as an outsider in many ways. First, I have never participated in N4N, nor any other ASMP. I also do not identify as underserved, further distancing myself

from the participants. Finally, I had not previously met any of the study participants, and there were some personal and cultural differences between us. A benefit of the outsider status could be the ability to appreciate a wider perspective than an insider who has more personal connections to the topic. Conversely, a drawback could be that alumni are hesitant to open up to someone who is an outsider. Ultimately, my relationship to the participants is best seen as an example of “the space between,” sharing both qualities of an insider and outsider (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). Perhaps most relevant to the study, its method, and analyses is that I strived to remain “reflexive” and fully authentic in my interactions with the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). In all, by acknowledging and examining my assumptions and biases, I hope to situate myself within the context of my study and convey an understanding that, as Stake says, “there is no value-free science in this world” (2006, p. 85).

This dissertation was developed with and chaired by a senior researcher, and it is important to declare his positionality as well. He identifies as a Latino male faculty member in counseling psychology, and although not a musician, he is a music lover who is passionate about partnering with community organizations devoted to meet the needs of minoritized populations. To address the power differential between us, we solved any differences that arose by deferring to the lead researcher’s proximity to the data. Since the lead researcher conducted the interviews, completed the transcriptions, and spent more time close to the data, the senior researcher’s advice was always to return to the data.

## **Participants**

Stake (2006) proposes that the benefits of a multiple case study may be limited if fewer than four or more than 10 cases are chosen. However, he also comments that many multiple case studies bend these guidelines for good reasons. As a general rule, he

recommends that case selection meet three criteria: the cases are relevant to the quintain, the cases provide diversity across contexts, and the cases provide a sound opportunity to learn about the complexity and contexts. In addition, Stake (2006) asserts that an important reason to conduct a multiple case study is to examine how the quintain functions in different environments. Correspondingly, case selection included N4N participants from two different program locations, including Northern and Southern California. Corroborating Stake's assertion regarding sample size, Yin (2014) also emphasizes that there is no set sample size for multiple case studies; rather, the goal is to reach saturation (i.e., when additional data collected will not lead to any new emergent themes) and to have enough cases to sufficiently answer research questions. With this in consideration, I planned on studying at least five cases, maintaining flexibility in regard to saturation by reevaluating as data is collected. Ultimately, I interviewed seven participants in total, the number of which was determined by reaching data saturation, or "informational redundancy" (Sandelowski, 2008, p. 875). Interviews were approximately 90 minutes in length, on average, and all seven interviews were included in the analysis. Each followed a semi-structured interview protocol, which included follow-up questions and clarifications, ultimately contributing to the richness and depth of the responses. When I started to notice that new data tended to be redundant of data already collected, this was informative of saturation being established, and no further interviews were conducted.

To identify participants, purposeful sampling was utilized. This sampling method is described by Patton (2002) as a powerful way to select information-rich cases that can shed light onto "issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry . . . yielding insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations" (p. 230). Patton suggested 16

strategies for purposeful sampling in qualitative research, each of which is intended to serve a different purpose (Suri, 2011). For the purpose of this dissertation, criterion sampling was used, which involves studying “all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2002, p. 238).

Consistent with collaborative research, participants were selected by community contacts (N4N staff) who have intimate knowledge about alumni experiences throughout their time at the program. To establish specifically bounded cases, a requirement of case studies, there were certain criteria that participants needed to meet (see Appendix A). First, consistent with literature on the importance of engagement rather than solely attendance (Hirsch, Mekinda, & Stawicki, 2010), participants needed to have been actively engaged in N4N for at least a year. In addition, staff were instructed to select participants who they considered to have been *successfully* engaged in the program. Engagement and success were defined by the multiple staff who were involved in the collaboration and who are the insider experts on alumni past participation. I met with each recruiting staff member to facilitate a discussion of what it means for a N4N participants to be successfully engaged. Staff reflected that these participants consistently attended the program (were “the regulars”), had a main focus of coming to the Boys & Girls Club for N4N, loved coming in, were helpful around the studio, enjoyed exploring creativity, produced content (“had something to show” for their time there), gained maturity and showed responsibility, showed up on time, respected program rules, understood that they are part of a team, showed respect, compassion, and empowerment for each other, had their own initiatives and followed through, put in effort, were effective communicators, held themselves and others accountable, and were persistent.

Staff were also asked to select alumni who have been out of the program for at least a year, allowing for retrospective accounts to inform responses to interview questions. Research supports the value of retrospective interviewing, highlighting how it may allow participants to more fully reflect on, appreciate, and articulate what transformations have occurred and what things have contributed to such transformations (Constantino & Angus, 2017). In addition, retrospective accounts can help distance participants from any pressure or influence they may feel from staff or the program to speak only positively about their experience. Finally, especially considering the developmental context in which N4N members participate (typically from ages 5-18), retrospective interviews provided alumni the opportunity to reflect on how the program components impacted them from an older perspective (participants were all young adults). Although the literature does not designate a specific amount of time for retrospection to be most beneficial, a minimum of one year is likely to have provided participants time to reflect on how their experiences affected their lives. After discussing with staff these specific criteria for potential participants and after obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (Protocol number: 10-18-0930) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, participant recruitment began.

### **Procedures**

Once participants were identified, specific times and locations for each interview were established, and best efforts were made to reduce the time and travel burden on participants. Almost all of the interviews were held at the N4N studio the participants had attended in the past, and one was held at a café in the same geographic location as the N4N studio (at the request of the participant). Participants were informed about the nature of the study, were asked to provide written consent for being interviewed and recorded, and were

offered a gift certificate for their participation (see Appendix B). After collecting demographic information where participants were asked to self-identify ethnicity, age, gender, and other areas (see Appendix C), semi-structured interviews were conducted using a protocol designed to elicit in-depth reflections from participants, guiding them to describe and reflect on experiences related to their participation in N4N (See Appendix D). The interview protocol was pilot tested, and interview questions were reviewed with N4N staff, all before finalizing them.

Pilot testing involved administering a set of questions after the first three interviews, designed to gauge participants' experiences of the interview and remove, add, or alter any questions in the protocol (See Appendix E). Participant feedback indicated that the questions were effective in providing them opportunities to expand on their experience related to the four research questions. Interviews were transcribed almost verbatim ("ums," "likes," etc. sometimes removed for clarity) and analyzed by the lead researcher, and similarities and differences among the cases were analyzed to better understand the quintain as a whole.

## **Analysis**

After transcription was completed, each case was analyzed individually to increase the understanding of participants' unique experiences at N4N in regard to the research questions. As Stake (2006) suggests, a multiple case report should be structured, in part, around the research questions, which should guide the search for understanding. Additionally, Stake (2006) emphasizes that each case to be studied is "a complex entity located in its own situation," indicating the importance of studying cultural, historical, social, and economic backgrounds and contexts of each case (p. 12). With Stake's methods guiding the analysis, the author reviewed each transcription, summarized participants' backgrounds

and introductions to N4N, and considered how to represent their unique experiences at N4N in relation to the research questions. The lead researcher selected representative quotes for each case and produced a narrative to portray how successfully engaged alumni experienced key program components of N4N. As outlined by Stake (2006), the senior researcher then reviewed the individual case analyses and provided suggestions and revisions. Stake (2006) notes that first, “each case is to be understood in depth, giving little immediate attention to the quintain” (p. 6). Following this, he suggests that the multiple case researcher “interprets patterns within each case, and then analyzes cross-case findings to make assertions about the binding [concept]” (p. 10), or “the phenomenon of interest” (p. 24).

To study the quintain across cases, an inductive form of thematic analysis—a qualitative research method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns, or themes, within data—was used to organize the data and derive meaning from it (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This widely-used and highly structured approach involves following six steps, including becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report. The strength of this approach is in its provision of a framework to organize the data, its expectation to develop themes in a systematic way, and its emphasis on iterative visual representations of the findings while striving for parsimony. In addition, thematic analysis aligns with the social constructivist stance of this study, as it recognizes that researchers cannot simply “give voice” to participants and instead must acknowledge theoretical positions and values in relation to qualitative research (p. 83). In fact, Braun and Clarke (2006) explicitly note that thematic analysis is compatible with the constructivist paradigm.

To conduct the thematic analysis, the author, who transcribed all interviews, reread them in an immersive way, searching for meaning and patterns. The author then began taking notes and coding for initial themes. At this point, the author had been exposed to the original interviews, the recordings of the interviews during transcriptions, and the rereading of the transcriptions, becoming exceedingly familiar with the data. QSR International's NVivo 11 qualitative data management software (NVivo, 2015) was used to assist in this six-step analytic process outlined by Braun and Clarke. The next step involved searching for themes after the initial coding had been done. Some potential themes were double or triple coded, and this process involved narrowing down the potential themes to begin forming more concise and relevant themes. This step also involved creating theme piles with small pieces of paper and sorting them on a table, as recommended by Braun and Clarke. Next, the author and the senior researcher met over the course of several weeks to review the themes and begin to develop a thematic map that represented the findings through the collective voices of participants. This step involved refining themes and collapsing some of them into each other, with the goal of meaningful coherence and clear and identifiable distinctions between themes. Themes were next defined and named, which involved reorganization of their order and representation on the map, as well as consideration of how each theme tells a story about the data, in relation to the research questions. Finally, the themes were written up with the goal of going beyond description and expanding on what the themes mean, the implications of the themes, and what the different themes reveal about the topic.

### **Best Qualitative Practices**

To account for some of the drawbacks of being an insider/outsider and entering the study with my own preconceived notions and biases, I engaged in four separate processes to



increase trustworthiness, using Creswell and Miller's (2000) list of eight strategies that are employed frequently by qualitative researchers as a guide. First, I engaged in researcher reflexivity and self-disclosed my assumptions, beliefs, and biases. I also participated in discussions with my advisor about the research, processing my experience conducting interviews, transcribing, and analyzing the data. Second, I aimed to gather rich, thick descriptions of the participants and their experiences (Geertz, 1973). I framed the questions in a neutral yet intentional way to facilitate in-depth descriptions of the participants' experiences at N4N. Third, I engaged in collaboration with others, including the participants through member checks, the N4N staff, and an experienced faculty member. Before and after most interviews, I met with the N4N staff member (community contact) and discussed how the interview process was going, strengthening our collaborative relationship.

As supported by Jacquez, Vaughn, and Wagner (2013), studies can benefit by partnering with youth participants, further empowering them and improving credibility. Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that the member checking process provides an opportunity for participants to add credibility to the qualitative study by reacting to the data and the final narrative. Including member checks was an improvement to this study's credibility compared to the initial study, which cited the lack of this as a limitation. Member checks are also considered a source of triangulation by Stake (1995), who suggests that members can help triangulate the researcher's observations and interpretations. Member checks involved meeting with participants via video conference after the initial interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. Participants received the transcriptions of their interview, as well as their individual case analysis, at least two weeks before the member check interview was conducted, as suggested by Doyle (2007). Seven invitations were

extended for member checks, and five interviewed alumni expressed interest in participating. Three alumni followed through and participated in member checks. Guided by a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix F), this type of member check enabled shared discussion of the transcript and analysis and focused on confirmation, modification, and verification of interview text and its analysis (Birt et al., 2016). It also allowed for prolonged engagement aimed at strengthening the relationship between the participants and the interviewer and allowing for deeper understanding and more open sharing. Member checks resulted in the confirmation and expansion of the theme “pay it forward,” since more time had passed between the initial interview, providing more opportunities for alumni to share their skills and knowledge with others. This is a good example of how member checks can confirm *and* modify analysis.

Finally, as a fourth effort toward increasing trustworthiness, I have spent a prolonged amount of time in “the field” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). My collaboration with N4N has been continuous throughout the past five years, and I have visited both Santa Barbara locations, as well as the Los Angeles location, several times. By the time the dissertation is complete, I will have been involved with N4N for over five years, having attended several public events, visited various locations, and interacted with many staff, members, and alumni.

In an effort to further triangulate findings, method triangulation was utilized in the form of “memoing,” with potential benefits including the enhancement of data exploration, the maintenance of momentum, and the facilitation of communication in the research team (Birks et al., 2008). Qualitative research is an evolutionary journey, and memoing can help researchers maintain flexibility and respond to thought processes at different stages of the

study's progression. In this study, memoing helped generate initial potential themes, maintain momentum when revisiting data after periods of inactivity, and organize data for individual cases, particularly when tracking background information and initial experiences at N4N. In addition to method triangulation, theory triangulation, using multiple theoretical perspectives to examine and interpret the data, was used (Carter et al., 2014).

The use of PYD and SDT has informed the study and provided a theoretical framework that has helped explain the findings in the context of previous research conducted with similar populations in similar settings. The combination of best qualitative practices outlined in this chapter aims to increase trustworthiness, dependability, confirmability, and credibility in the study, and it is the goal that these efforts will help successfully explore the experiences of underserved alumni at N4N.

## Chapter IV: Results

### Individual Case Analyses

As Stake (2006) emphasizes, “the first objective of a case study is to understand the case” (p. 2). In this section, cases are presented in a way that illustrates each participants’ background, introduction to N4N, and experience with N4N in relation to each of the research questions. The individual case analyses contribute to a deeper understanding of each case and highlight the most impactful aspects of participants’ experiences at N4N.

#### *Daniel*

**Background.** At the time of the interview, Daniel (this and all names have been altered for anonymity) self-identified as a 20-year-old Latino male, and he was enrolled in a bachelor’s degree for song writing at the Los Angeles College of Music. His primary language was Spanish, although he also spoke English. He was born in Mexico and moved to Southern California when he was 7, which created mixed immigration statuses within his family. He explained, “being an immigrant, my parents wanted a better life for us, so they actually brought us here. Three of my siblings . . . were born over there in Mexico, in Tijuana. And three other ones who are here, were born here, so they are American citizens.” While at N4N, he experienced “adversity through some financial, emotional, and legal status issues.”

**Introduction to N4N.** Daniel first started playing music in church and later took a guitar class in high school, which made him “fall in love” with music. His guitar class had a performance component, and when he performed his first original song, he felt an overwhelming sense of support from his peers and teacher. This motivated him to start playing music at his church, where he saw its impact:

And I had never thought about it until I later went back to church, taking my skills and guitar. They actually put me up there to lead one of the worship services. And then from there I saw the impact it did. Like, I kind of liked being up there and seeing the people that could connect with music, you know? And be delivering that emotion and stuff.

This experience led him to become the leader of his church's worship band. At the same time, Daniel was a member of the Boys & Girls Club where he participated in the basketball program. During this time, the N4N studio was being built, and his curiosity led him to meet some of the staff on the first day the studio was open. They invited him in, and he even helped them build some of the furniture.

**Relationships with staff.** Daniel characterized his relationships with staff as "super close" and "supportive," particularly during times of personal needs. He went through a "rough time" where he was not talking with his parents, and staff provided a supportive environment. He explained: "I would just write about personal things. You're kind of vulnerable at that state, you know, sharing those emotions and stuff. So we built a really close relationship, like me telling him I have these, like, problems at home." Moreover, Daniel referred to the staff using words like "brother," "second dad," and "Latina mother."

The support that Daniel received extended not only to him but to his family as well: the family was invited to potlucks, Christmas adopt-a-family events, and Thanksgiving meals. The family's financial limitations were acknowledged by the Boys & Girls Club staff who waived the membership fees for all of them. They spent so much time with the staff at N4N and the Boys & Girls Club that he referred to them as his "second family."

Regarding the impact of the relationships Boys & Girls Club and Notes for Notes staff built with him and his family, Daniel reflected:

You know, we would never have those kinds of experiences at home. We were just home celebrating by ourselves. It was kind of lonely, you know? Cause there's a part of family that's not really that close to us. . . . Overall, the Club had a huge impact in our memories over the years.

Daniel experienced the N4N staff as genuine and this, in turn impacted his personal experience in the program:

Like when I came here, the staff were cool. Adam built the close relationship, you know? . . . They were actually taking their jobs seriously, and you can tell the effects of it now; it's that I'm back here again talking about it because it was that much of an impact. These staff were really genuine.

**Opportunities.** Daniel's experience at N4N provided him access to several resources and opportunities he had not previously had, which supported his growth as a musician and impacted his educational and career path. Live performance opportunities facilitated through N4N were particularly impactful for Daniel as they expanded his professional connections and strengthened his passion for music:

I feel like if I would have stayed [performing] at church, it probably would have been the same thing for years . . . But because of [N4N] it just kinda skyrocketed to another level. I mean, we're in LA, [N4N has] connections to people in music and you know, like LA is the entertainment capital I guess you could say. So a lot of opportunity.

Similarly: "Performing at the [well-known local music venue] made me even love music even more. Like, this is what I'm going to be doing . . . this is what I love to do." Moreover,

performance opportunities gave Daniel an outlet to share his Latino culture with others and feel supported by his community. Performing live brought energy to his music fueled by audience members dancing, singing along, and providing encouragement. Performing, for Daniel, reinforced the idea that music is “the universal language” and that it “speaks for itself.”

N4N provided Daniel with educational opportunities as well. Spending time with N4N staff helped Daniel develop insider knowledge in areas related to music and nonprofits. He reflected:

Being with the staff, I would just kind of hear from them and their knowledge and stuff and hear the ways of networking with different people. And yeah, it was all just a huge impact on me. It was an impact that I probably wouldn't have gotten at home, if I was not in those programs.

In addition to informal observational learning, Daniel also earned a full-ride scholarship to the Los Angeles College of Music, which was made possible through a scholarship he received through connections at N4N. This made him the first person in his family to attend college.

Beyond performance and learning opportunities, Daniel also reported that N4N provided equipment he did not have access to otherwise:

I didn't have the studio over there at home, so I couldn't really work on music. Coming here to the studio, recording vocals. The computers also, printers, all that stuff, is not really at my house. So, coming here was really dope. Taking advantage of everything was my goal every time I came in here; being as productive as possible.

In addition, the only instrument that Daniel had access to at home before coming to N4N was a guitar his father found on the side of the freeway. However, through a N4N performance contest, Daniel won a high-quality guitar that he had always wanted but could not afford.

**Physical and Psychological Safety, Accessibility.** Daniel experienced N4N as a place where he was safe, inspired musically, and could be himself without fear of being judged. The environment stimulated many positive feelings for him: “Being in the studio, I just always felt inspired; I always felt excited. Like, I remember the feeling . . . everyone here does music, everyone here wants to do something, so I . . . always wanted to come back to that same feeling.” He described the studio as a “home” and “safe haven,” where he felt supported by staff and other peers and where he could provide support to others. Since he was one of the more senior members and younger peers looked up to him “as an older brother,” he became a role model, striving to cultivate a supportive environment for struggling members who “people don’t want to hang with.” This approach went over well, and he reflected, “before I knew it, I just had millions of people behind my back supporting me.” Daniel found himself in a dual role: one that made him feel safe as a mentee with support, and another as a mentor that allowed him to provide a feeling of safety and acceptance for others.

Regarding accessibility, Daniel did not identify many barriers. He took the local city bus after school to the Club, along with other friends who attended. He felt that “it’s a pretty safe neighborhood,” which contrasted his experiences in other neighborhoods he lived in. “I grew up in the hood, you could say. . . . You can’t be walking around after 7, [but] Monterey Park, you can be walking at 11 or midnight and nothing would happen. So yeah, like, it kept



me out of trouble too I guess.” For Daniel, the safe and easily accessible location helped eliminate barriers, making his almost daily participation at N4N possible.

**Freedom of expression.** Daniel experienced N4N as a “no judgement zone,” a place where “you can say whatever you want in music” and where “there were no put downs about anything.” He described how he had autonomy during recording sessions to “just not be feeling it and stop,” and he would be met with respect and patience from staff. He contrasted his experience at N4N to school, where his desire to not continue working on assignments led people to “kind of trip out and say that’s your job.” Comparing the two made him feel “free, never really limited to anything” at N4N.

In addition, Daniel compared differences between his home environment and the N4N studio, noting the freedom he felt at N4N to express himself and be “silly,” whereas that would feel “weird” at home. The impact of this contrast, between personal home life and a nonjudgmental space at N4N, is illustrated through the following quote:

That was mainly the best part, was that I wouldn’t get judged. Because at home I can’t really be talking about the problems in my music, because then they’d be like, why are you writing that in your music, you know? So that’s something that I wouldn’t be able to sing at home, but here it would be like, oh ok, let’s kind of make that into music. So that’s the difference. Music is very intimate, so you kind of have to be in a place where you can let it be free, so you kind of don’t have to lock it in.

Daniel saw music as a form of self-expression, and he lauded N4N for its accepting environment, which he felt created a space for authenticity. He reflected, “Here, I was a different person . . . because I felt accepted.” Comparing N4N to larger after-school programs and high school, Daniel felt positively impacted by the smaller, more intimate setting of N4N

where open expression of feelings through music was normalized and encouraged. According to him, N4N staff had more control over the setting to promote a “judgement free zone” with no bullying or put-downs, creating a space for members to feel comfortable opening up and musically expressing “intimate parts that they really wanted to say.” For him, it provided a setting to develop a “different persona” through his music, where, on stage, he felt like he made a “huge impact” and felt more like a leader with responsibility.

### ***Benjamin***

**Background.** At the time of the interview, Benjamin self-identified as a 21-year-old Latino male. He came from a “low-income” family, where at the time he was living in a two-bedroom house with 10 people. His “resources were fairly limited . . . especially when it came to education or any other type of, just anything pretty much.” Benjamin’s mother left the family when he was 6, leaving him and his younger brother to be raised by his father and grandmother. This difficult transition, along with his father’s alcoholism, “kind of traumatized [him] a lot as a little kid,” and he became a “very big troublemaker.” He joined the Boys & Girls Club in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, where he was encouraged to talk to his father and learned other life skills. Once he joined N4N, music “became a very big sanctuary for getting away from . . . everything in life.” During a particularly difficult time, Benjamin “contemplated a lot about ceasing to exist, but that all stopped because music was there.”

**Introduction to N4N.** Benjamin joined N4N as it was opening during his senior year of high school. He was “the most excited [he] had ever been in [his] life” to hear that a music studio was opening in the Boys & Girls Club he had attended for 6 years, and he “really, really wanted” to be involved. On the first day they opened, Benjamin was there, helping set up furniture. He was greeted by a warm welcome from one of the staff members, and he felt

compelled to return to the studio every day thereafter. He was involved as a member for 2 and a half years, and once he started college, he began to volunteer at N4N.

**Relationships with staff.** Benjamin characterized his relationships with staff as encouraging, caring, and loving. Staff made him feel comfortable enough to become vulnerable and express his feelings through music, which made him feel “appreciated . . . as an individual.” During his first exposure to N4N, Benjamin remarked that the staff trusted him with a drill, which he felt created a foundation of trust that continued throughout his experience. The staff harnessed Benjamin’s natural passion for music to motivate him to grow and “make [him] work harder.” Through music, they encouraged him to pursue what he wanted in areas beyond music, including higher education and other “life experiences.” For example, Benjamin reflected that staff were able to help him overcome his fear of public singing and speaking, and that they showed him “what it’s like to be vulnerable and not be afraid.”

Benjamin felt that the staff treated him as if he were family and not just a Club member, which, in turn, made him feel like N4N was a “home.” According to Benjamin, staff went above and beyond their job descriptions, encouraging him to focus on his education before music and attending graduation and other events at his house:

And for them to even come to family events, that’s crazy. That’s insane . . . for them to just come to my family events, meet my family, eat my grandmother’s cooking, that’s a whole different type of feeling to have for these gentlemen that work here. He referred to staff as “a different family outside of [his] family,” “father figures,” and “mentors” who he wanted to impress, make proud, and emulate. He elaborated: “Adam can

light up a room in a second, and I took that at heart. . . . I really wanted to implement how Adam was in my life, so to this day I've always just tried my best to be positive.”

When other people in his life were not supporting him, N4N staff “saw [him] as an individual with potential,” which made him feel comfortable and motivated. Up until then, he had come to N4N “solely to learn the music.” After feeling “appreciated . . . it wasn't just about music anymore. It was about life.”

One particularly powerful impact of Benjamin's relationships with N4N staff is that they helped him find value in his life during a time when he was “a very sad individual, very angry individual” who “didn't know how to control those emotions.” Before coming to N4N, he experienced thoughts of taking his life and felt alone and depressed, like he did not belong. He expressed:

Here at the studio, they were able to just show me that, without me even talking about it, without me even hinting that I thought about ending my own life, they were able to show me that my life was important. That I mattered. That I was appreciated and loved. Even when I didn't feel it, even when I didn't even need to talk about it, I felt that from these guys. And they were able to get me out of that hole that I had in my head, that whole sadness that I had in my head.

**Opportunities.** Benjamin had several new unexpected experiences at N4N that encouraged his growth as a performer and a musician. He recalled, “I never thought in my life I would ever sing for a crowd. I'd never hear cheers for me. It was amazing.” He joined N4N with a fear of public singing and speaking, and he left the program with a new, reframed understanding of the nervous feeling he would get performing in front of others. He

explained that staff showed him “that if you’re not nervous, it’s not something you want to do.”

Before coming to N4N, Benjamin did not have access to professional musical connections or musical resources, like recording equipment, computers, and instruments. During his time there, he learned to produce music and had the opportunity to work on one of his songs with an “A-list band.” N4N opened up the world of music for Benjamin beyond the “old drumsticks” his family was able to afford:

Pretty much everything in the studio I never would have had access to. . . . I grew up a low-income family. We can’t afford the nice things. My family, we’ve always been paycheck to paycheck . . . and what I had was old drumsticks and a practice beat pad from 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and that’s it. That’s all I had.

These experiences and resources also had a positive impact on Benjamin’s relationship with his father, whom he felt he had disappointed in the past. He reflected:

Just having that resource, those opportunities, presented to me is crazy. Something that I never thought I was gonna do. When I could come home and tell my dad the stories that I had and how I was able to perform for a hundred people and having them all cheer me on, he was super, super proud.

**Physical and Psychological Safety, Accessibility.** Benjamin described N4N as “a second home away from home” where he always felt welcome, comfortable, and stress-free, which he contrasted to his experience at his house. He also emphasized how the studio environment made him feel like he belonged, embracing the diversity of the members and combining that with a “no judgement” attitude. In describing the environment, Benjamin reflected:

Just to be surrounded by music. Surrounded by different people who view things differently, who like different music, who play differently, who sing differently, who just are different, . . . no matter what it was, Notes for Notes embraced diversity. They kinda just really made it feel like a home . . . like I was supposed to be here.

This accepting and “safe” environment motivated Benjamin to return to N4N every day, while it provided a space for other members to “express themselves more than they could to anybody else.” He also noted that he never felt any threat of physical fights at N4N or witnessed any safety issues, as they “made sure that they followed all safety precautions” and “kept the studio clean and maintained.” Although this was less important to him than feeling psychologically safe, it contributed to his experience of N4N as a safe place to be.

Benjamin also felt that being at the N4N’s environment encouraged further education and prevented him from engaging in illegal activities, including gang membership, underage drinking, and drug use. Commenting about his early alcohol use and family influence, he stated:

If it wasn’t for Notes for Notes being able to have me feel like this place was home . . . I would definitely not be doing the things that I am doing now. I did hang out with a lot of drug addicts . . . and if I didn’t find this place . . . I don’t think I would have pursued any type of further education. I would definitely probably be stuck in the streets doing drugs or maybe not even alive to this day. And for that, I’ve always been so grateful. . . . Notes for Notes showed me that I didn’t need that in my life.

This influence helped produce a more positive outlook on his life during a time of great struggle, making him feel like he was “such a better person than who [he] was and how [he] grew up.”

Regarding accessibility, Benjamin used the local bus system and his push scooter to commute to the Club, which took approximately 30 minutes. Despite there being slight barriers to his transportation, he did not see the “hassle” as too much. Instead, he thought, “ok, I want to be at the club. I want to be in the studio. I want to make music. I need to get there as fast as possible.” His desire to be at N4N overcame the distance to the Club from his school.

**Freedom of expression.** Benjamin explained that he was bullied when he was younger, and music became a medium by which he could “withdraw from [himself], and merely be in [his] own thoughts.” Music was a way for him to express and process emotions for the first time in a productive way. N4N staff helped him understand his emotions, and they encouraged him to sing about his personal life and express those feelings through lyrics and music. When he heard about their no censorship policy, he “tested the waters.” He recalled:

I wanted to see what I could say, do, show, what can I express myself in. . . . Am I gonna be judged if I say I want to do this, to sing this? And there was never anything! The feedback was always positive, and they always brought that comfortable atmosphere, being able to express myself, no matter what it was.

For Benjamin and other participants (according to him), N4N was a place to express themselves the way “they couldn’t express themselves on the outside world.” This experience contrasted his experience playing football in high school:

The only other thing that I did at school was just football . . . but nothing really ever compared to this. This studio, this environment, these people, they definitely bring you a whole different level of just comfortability. . . . You aren’t limited to how you

think and how you feel like how you would be at school. . . . Other activities at school, you always felt limited to not being yourself, to being a specific way, and here they encouraged you to express yourself for who you are and find out who you truly are and embrace it, and that's what they've done here. They did that for me.

Compared to school activities, Benjamin felt “empowered” and “safe” to express himself at N4N because of the encouraging environment and the acceptance of his curiosity and feelings.

### ***Sam***

**Background.** At the time of the interview, Sam self-identified as a 19-year-old African American male who was employed as a staff member of the Boys & Girls Club. He had been involved in the Boys & Girls Club for 12 years, 3 of which were spent engaged at N4N. He identified as coming from a “middle class” family. In addition to his interest in music, he also expressed a passion for playing water polo and attending church.

**Introduction to N4N.** Sam started coming to the Boys & Girls Club when he was 7, and almost 10 years later the N4N studio was built, replacing the existing movie room. He had previously played the violin in school, but it had been several years since he picked it up. He decided to explore the new studio due to his past positive experience with music, but he had “never really had the opportunity to explore and learn how to play” other instruments. Over the following 3 years at N4N, he learned to play the guitar, bass, and drums, as well as how to edit music recordings.

**Relationships with staff.** Sam characterized his relationships with staff as reliable, caring, and inspiring. He “looked up to all of them” as talented musicians and “really cool guys.” He exclaimed, “when you see them perform, they're like gods!” One of the staff



members in particular was a talented drummer, Sam's instrument of choice, and he reflected: "I looked up to him the most because he was the drummer that I wanted to be." Sam's position, at the time of interviewing, as a Boys & Girls Club staff member provided a unique perspective on N4N staffs' intrinsic motivation to work at the studio. He noted:

They've always seemed pretty dedicated to what they do. . . . I feel like it's really about the kids . . . and as a staff here, I see how other staff behave, and you can just kind of sense when someone is doing it just for like the money or something. Or if they actually care, you know? And they care about the kids.

Sam described how he felt that personally while he was in the program, as well as how he noticed the authentic care benefiting other youth from his later perspective as a staff member.

Sam also identified how the combination of caring, reliable staff and musical resources motivated him to return so frequently; despite his love for instruments, without the "cool" or "welcoming" staff, "[he] definitely wouldn't come back." However, because the staff "made the experience," he felt more compelled to engage with the music:

If I wanted to play drums or I wanted to play guitar, I simply could have taken a class at school and let that be it. . . . I didn't have to go to the Notes for Notes program. I wasn't forced. But because of the staff, that was honestly, like 99% of it."

Sam emphasized how reliable he felt the staff were: "If I need something, I know I could hit them up for anything like that, so that's really cool."

**Opportunities.** Sam's experience with the opportunities provided by N4N can be characterized as expansive. His interest in the drums that developed at N4N led to his choice to take a world drumming class in high school; the new musical skills he learned at N4N led him to participate in his church band, increasing his church involvement and cultivating a

highly valued religious community with his friends and family. His connections at N4N also led to the opportunity to “go beyond the borders” of the Boys & Girls Club facility and give back to his community through free live performances at local and adjacent-city farmer’s markets and churches. Sam explained, “I felt like my music career really started when I joined Notes for Notes; like, that was a direct kind of cause. . . . I never really had the opportunity to really explore and learn how to play.” Once his musical skill level reached a certain point, he was able to “pay it forward” by providing a “service to other people through the music program.”

One of the most impactful opportunities that N4N provided Sam was access to musical instruction, which allowed him to create a meaningful relationship to his church. He explained:

It’s also helped me to branch out in terms of service at church, so I’m able to join the worship team. . . . Before that, I didn’t even go to church, so what ended up making me go to church was the fact that my friends needed someone to help them play guitar or drums. . . . Through church I feel like I’ve made a lot of positive difference in my life since then. . . . Religion kind of brought me closer to my parents, my friends . . . being able to connect on a whole other level, . . . so thanks to Notes for Notes, I made that connection and I was able to join something that is really important to me now.

**Physical and Psychological Safety, Accessibility.** Sam described the N4N environment as a place where he “always felt welcomed and appreciated.” He experienced the studio as a “safe” space where he had many friends and would “never get in fights with anyone or anything like that.” He explained that this motivated him to return because “every time [he] would come, it was a good experience.” During high school, Sam divided much of

his after-school time between N4N, other Boys & Girls Club activities, and water polo. He explained:

Just being in the club itself was a way of keeping someone off the streets, like myself. Especially since I'm a young African American male, like it could be pretty dangerous. But I mean, if I'm not here at the club then I would be there at water polo. And if I wasn't at the club or at water polo, then I was probably at home . . . and my parents always are reinforcing that idea of 'safety first.'

For Sam, N4N was one of several "positive environments" where he had access to "people who support and care about [him]" after school.

Regarding access to N4N, Sam had few transportation barriers due to the proximity of his water polo practices to the studio. He explained, "I'd just walk across the street from the park because when I have water polo, the school bus brings us over here to the pool. So yeah, it was really convenient." The close proximity of the Club to the public swimming pool and nearby community park encouraged Sam to consistently attend: "I really enjoyed coming here, so the fact that I was not far away at all . . . made it like, definitely I need to come. Because I could be involved in something much bigger and it was literally a block away."

**Freedom of expression.** Sam emphasized the importance of exploration and autonomy at N4N:

I had the freedom to choose whatever instrument I wanted that was in there, like I remember I picked up the ukulele . . . and I tried the piano. . . . I mean, I've tried everything in there. The bass, and all of it. And they have DJ equipment, and I've played with that. . . . That autonomy allowed me to get into the drums, get into the guitar, and especially get into the editing stuff . . . where my heart is right now.

Through this exploration, he was able to learn how to express himself through music and connect with others. At church, he described how he uses drum cadences to create “a moment of silence” where “sometimes that’s the most powerful noise in the room” and it “makes the crowd go wild.”

Sam also witnessed other members expressing themselves in the “welcoming” and “open” environment at N4N, and he highlighted the importance of this musical expression:

I’ve definitely witnessed the Notes for Notes program allowing people to express themselves. I’ve seen it a lot. And I think that’s good because I mean sometimes people are asking for help, and you won’t know it until in that moment, when they are singing their lyrics . . . when they actually need someone there. And you’ll never know because they were just hiding it or holding it in. But I think it’s pretty powerful having the Notes for Notes program ‘cause someone could be going through something, and they are crying out for help and no one knows until they hear that lyric, you know? So yeah, I think it’s awesome in terms of allowing kids to express themselves.

Comparing N4N to his experiences at school and even other areas within the Boys & Girls Club, Sam lauded the program for its encouragement of self-expression:

I think they encourage it, you know? I see when they’re talking to the kids and getting them to express how they feel inside. I definitely would say that they encourage the members to do that. I think that’s their way of promoting the best music, is like self-expression. You can really connect to the songs, the music, the lyrics, whatever it is you’re doing.

Sam's unique perspective as a Boys & Girls Club staff member provided insight to an important distinction between N4N policy and Boys & Girls Club policy that allows for more freedom of expression:

At school or the Boys & Girls Club, there's some things that you probably just shouldn't say . . . some things like if you say it, it's gonna end up causing a domino effect of other things to occur . . . because if you're here at the club, and you say something that like doesn't sound appropriate then you're definitely going to get in trouble . . . and that causes [club members] to keep some stuff in. Some stuff doesn't get shared. Or maybe they're rapping or something, right? And they say some bad words. And then they get in trouble for doing that. Well, perhaps their creativity or whatever they got going, is being kind of forced not to show. But then if I'm closing out their creativity, at least they're able to let it out in the Notes for Notes studio, you know? . . . By me getting them in trouble, they're deciding, 'no I'm gonna stop doing this,' but in the Notes for Notes studio, they're not going to get in trouble. They're going to get encouraged, and maybe what they're trying to express is maybe going to be developed into a talent.

### *Marina*

**Background.** At the time of the interview, Marina self-identified as a 20-year-old Hispanic female who was employed at a local café and enrolled as a community college student. She considered herself low-income during her time at N4N. Her musical interests were primarily focused around singing and song writing, and she had recently developed an interest in recording. A pertinent aspect of her identity was that she was enrolled in special education classes, and at one point during school she was told in front of her mother that she

was “unteachable.” Her challenges in school affected the timeline of her participation at N4N, resulting in two separate experiences: first at age 12, and then again at age 19.

**Introduction to N4N.** Marina was introduced to N4N when it first opened, and she was drawn to the opportunity of listening to and creating music in a social environment. She was interested in theatre arts and singing, and she felt “a little bit skeptical” about N4N being a “scam,” since she had heard of other peers being “pulled into” other music and theatre-related programs that had a negative influence on them. However, she ended up “loving” it. Due to academic difficulties, she had to make the “adult choice” to stop attending N4N and focus on school. To her surprise, she was allowed to return to the studio after she graduated high school, and her second experience at N4N resulted in significant growth as a singer and song writer.

**Relationships with staff.** Marina characterized her relationships with staff as encouraging, “hard-working and dedicated,” and fueled by a shared passion for music. She referred to staff using words like “surrogate brother,” “friend,” “mentor,” and “companion.” Recalling her experience in a school music class, she explained that her teacher “made fun” of her voice and told her she “couldn’t sing,” leading her to think, “I can’t do this.” In comparison, she felt that the N4N staff “saw that [music] was something that [she] really wanted to do” and “kept pushing [her] to do more. This theme of “pushing” for growth and exploration recurred in Marina’s descriptions of her relationships with staff:

Jake felt like a little bit of a surrogate brother to me in the sense that he was somebody who I could bicker with, but he was always still there to really support me and to push me to do better . . . to do more and to try new things.

At a time where she felt discouraged by previous music experiences, Marina experienced that N4N staff “really saw that there was something in [her],” which encouraged her to keep “pushing” and “moving forward.”

Marina described how staff helped build her confidence and excitement for music through their encouragement: “Like, I was really excited and just like, ‘wow, somebody sees that I have potential.’ . . . So it was also something that really helped me build my confidence later on as a kid.” Marina’s relationships with staff created a (figurative) appetite for growth and improvement:

knowing that at some point I’ll be able to come into the studio and show Dave what I’ve written . . . is what makes me feel even more hungry for the music that I want to do and what I want to pursue as a musician . . . and what I really like about Jake is that he sees how passionate I am about it, and so it’s almost like he feeds off of that.

In addition to musical motivation, Marina appreciated the personal friendship and support she received from staff:

What’s cool is not only is he looking at me as somebody who’s just coming in to do music, but we’re able to have conversations . . . not only as people who are working together, but as companions. . . . He’ll ask me how school is going and how it is looking for jobs, and how life is at home . . . and you know, I think that something that’s really great and very sentimental that is valuable to me.

This personal connection with staff helped motivate Marina’s musicality: “I feel like if I didn’t have the relationship that I had with Jake or Dave, I don’t think that I would be in this state of musicality and wanting to be a professional musician as I do now.” During a time

when she was “having to go through so many struggles alone; with education, making friends, and keeping people in [her] life,” she reflected:

The relationships with staff not only helped me build up my self-confidence more but has also helped me build more of a self-love, accepting myself for who I am with the flaws that I have and with the struggles that I have to deal with.

**Opportunities.** Marina’s first experience at N4N provided an “exciting” introduction to musical instruments, the recording studio, and instruction. When she returned later, she had a more directed purpose of improving as a singer and song writer. N4N provided flexibility in her case, allowing her to come back to the studio and utilize the resources as a “nonmember.” This exception motivated her to “work harder” and be productive:

Being able to come here as a nonmember . . . and being able to do this without having to pay for anything, I mean how much more could I ask . . . besides the fact that like I feel so lucky? And it just makes me want to work harder for what I want and the music that I want to make and sing and produce.

Marina emphasized how, with a minimum wage job, she would not “be able to afford even a single penny” for another studio experience.

A meaningful opportunity for Marina was being invited to the LA College of Music open house by a N4N staff member. She attended with her mother, and she was able to learn about the classes, degrees, and scholarships offered, as well as witness the student life and meet instructors. She reflected, “I think that was also a really good opportunity because it helped me being able to think about possibly transferring there from the community college that I’m at right now.” Especially considering Marina’s challenging academic history, this was an important opportunity that created hope and agency toward a future career in music.



**Physical and Psychological Safety, Accessibility.** Marina described N4N as a “home” where she could “have an outlet” if she had a bad day or felt stressed or upset about something. She contrasted her experience at N4N to school where she was having “a lot of hardships” and experiencing “bullying.” At N4N, she felt that it was a “safe” place where she was “able to tell [herself] that [she] had potential.” She also contrasted N4N to her home, where she did not have her own room:

I don’t really have too much of a sense of privacy, so being able to come here and know that I can just do anything at free will and not have to have any restrictions. . . . I think that’s why it kind of felt like this place was like my own room; it was my own space, and it was something that I was able to do with my own time, with my own imagination, my own strategies, my own studies. . . . And to be able to create things I really liked . . . it almost felt like I was constantly decorating my room with new things.

Marina explained that, during the time between her first and second experience at N4N, she found herself “hanging out with the wrong people” and “getting into things that weren’t appropriate for a kid at the age of 13 through 15.” When she returned to N4N in her late teens, however, she felt that “coming back into the studio...and feeling like I’m back at home is what was really helpful.” She expressed:

I feel like this is now a way to keep my head on straight and to keep me from leaning more towards the left or leaning more towards the right instead of just going straight on. And you know, being in the path that I should be taking.

Regarding accessibility, Marina experienced some transportation barriers. Her mother used to bring her when she was younger, but when she returned, she had to find a new way to

commute to the studio: “I had no transportation. I didn’t really know my way around. I didn’t really understand how to use the buses, and I was always very scared about taking public transportation and getting lost. So that was a huge thing.” However, getting a car dissolved this barrier: “It was like, the second I got my car, I had just kept thinking about, ‘Oh, I can go back to the studio.’ So I would make the time, no matter what.” For Marina, the combination of ease of access and intrinsic motivation to come to the studio helped reduce transportation barriers. Additionally, staffs’ scheduling flexibility made it possible for her to remain employed and afford her car, continue attending college classes, and still take advantage of N4N opportunities.

**Freedom of expression.** Marina came from experiences at school where she felt that instructors were always “telling [her] what to do.” At N4N, she was able to “do the kind of things that [she] decided to do on [her] own.” She reflected: “What had always made me come back was just the fact that I could be whoever and do whatever I wanted in the studio, and it didn’t really matter what anything was about.” In contrast to her previous experience “getting into things that weren’t appropriate for a kid,” the freedom she felt at N4N came with direction from trusted staff, who helped her make her own decisions without judgement. Recalling her music class experience at school, Marina stated:

Coming from somebody that has been bullied a lot as a kid . . . it’s very tough to think that you can do something on your own, knowing that doing something that you loved before, people judged you for it.

This feeling changed when she arrived at N4N, where she developed a sense of autonomy:

One day I remember [Jake] telling me, ‘don’t ask me what I want; you just tell me what it is that you want.’ And I think from there, it ended up kind of then clicking in

my head that like, ‘Oh, it’s my choice. I get to do that.’ And even now, it’s always hard for me to make decisions because I think as a kid I was always scared to make my own choices because I was always shut down a lot. . . . So when [Jake] had pretty much told me, ‘No, you tell me what you want and then we’ll do it,’ I think from there, that was when I had realized, ‘Oh, it is my choice. Like, I get to do what I want.’ That’s when I was able to see that I had more freedom and was able to think more freely of myself and on my own.

Marina described another experience at a theatre arts program where she felt her minority status of “the only Hispanic there” made her “unwelcome” and without a voice:

I guess you could say [I was] not a part of whatever they were creating. . . . So that was one encounter that I had that made me feel I didn’t really have a voice or that I didn’t seem to matter, or that my own opinions didn’t really matter.

She remembered thinking, “wow I really have no say in anything.” which “defeated [her] self-confidence” and was a “huge letdown in [her] feeling that [she] didn’t really have a voice.” Comparing this experience to her time at N4N, she reflected:

[At N4N] when I was now given the choice to like, ‘no, it’s your choice, you get to pick, you get to do what you want,’ . . . It’s a very huge difference because I am now welcomed, not just as a regular person but as myself.

### ***Emilio***

**Background.** At the time of the interview, Emilio self-identified as a 20-year-old Hispanic male, enrolled as a student at a Southern California college. He identified as low-income during his time at N4N. His musical interests were primarily focused around playing guitar and piano, and he attended N4N for two years.

**Introduction to N4N.** Emilio was a member of the Boys & Girls Club for several years before the N4N studio was created. Once it opened, he was encouraged by a friend to come explore the space. Initially, Emilio was not that interested in learning a musical instrument since it seemed difficult, but soon he became bored of being in the studio and not engaging with music. He decided to “roll with it,” and it “snowballed” into a passion, mostly for guitar. Once he became more engaged at N4N, he started attending every day during open hours.

**Relationships with staff.** Emilio characterized his relationships with staff as “awesome,” “important,” and “safe.” He viewed them as supportive role models with whom he could talk about “everyday life or school.” They frequently joked around, and he felt comfortable asking staff for help: “I wasn’t afraid to ask them, ‘Hey can you show me how to play this or can you show me how to do this chord?’”

**Opportunities.** Despite his initial disinterest in music, Emilio took advantage of the opportunities that N4N had to offer. He explored several instruments including guitar, bass, drums, piano, and ukulele. This exploration “sparked a real interest” in him, and he exclaimed, “It was awesome! One of the best things ever. I love playing guitar, and I’m gonna play it till the day I die.” One of the most important opportunities for Emilio was having access to “human” instructors. He had tried learning music through videos on the computer, which had notable limitations:

There’d be this little change, and I’d have to like rewind and rewind and rewind, and be like, ‘Wait now, I didn’t get it.’ And have to keep on doing it. And like, if I come here, there’s a person here to instruct me and tell me how to do it properly.

Emilio expressed gratitude for the development of his new passion that was made available through his experience at N4N:

It was full of opportunities here. I loved it. We could make our own music, just play whatever we want, get instructed to help us out. It's an awesome place. . . . I'm just extremely thankful for Notes for Notes 'cause if it wasn't for this program, I don't know what I would be doing. Like my main hobby, I guess you could say. 'Cause like whenever I don't know what to do, I just pick up my guitar. And I don't know what I would be doing if I wasn't playing guitar.

**Physical and Psychological Safety, Accessibility.** Emilio described the N4N studio as a “safe” place. He stated, “I felt welcome, you know? I felt happy; I liked being here. It's a place that I enjoy being.” The studio was “easily accessible” in terms of location and studio availability. He and his friend took the school bus together daily, and they were dropped off less than a block away from the Club. This transportation was free and convenient, and it allowed Emilio to travel with his friend, increasing his motivation to attend N4N. Emilio also discussed how staff created “order” at N4N through a sign-up chart designed to reserve time slots in the studio, especially during busier periods of the year. He claimed that, even when it was busy, “it was pretty easy” to access the equipment and resources.

**Freedom of expression.** Emilio discovered how to express himself musically at N4N and described it as “magical.” At N4N, he explained, “you get the opportunity to create whatever you want.” He would change his strumming patterns, song choice, or intensity based on his feelings. For example, when he earned a 96% on his calculus test, he came into N4N after school and played the drum set loudly to express his content. He experienced freedom to express himself as he liked, with a balance of enforced studio noise rules:

“They’ve let me play whatever I want. A lot of times Jake would tell me to turn down the volume though (laughter). But I’d play whatever song I want.” Although he did not write music, Emilio recalled how staff held song writing workshops, allowing “kids to write music and express themselves.”

The freedom in the studio led to an expansion of Emilio’s musical instrument exposure and curiosity:

It felt like I had all the freedom. Like, anything I could get my hands on they let me play with, and they let me mess around with and learn on it. It was awesome. Like the ukulele, even, I didn’t even want to play it. And then I think that my friend was playing it, and Jake was showing him how to play a song, and I was like, ‘Might as well pick it up, learn something new.’

Emilio compared the freedom at N4N to the rigidity at school, noting that the freedom felt more welcoming:

It just seems more rigid in other places like school. It just seems like, ‘Eh, that’s not really the place to do anything,’ you know? It’s not like I tried to do something, and [N4N] was like, “No don’t do that.” It’s just a welcoming place, it feels like, you know?

He continued to describe N4N as “more open” than school; a place where “you can just do whatever you feel like or not do whatever you feel like,” and a place where “you can express yourself more openly, and there’s no issue about it.” This freedom was influential in his decision to return daily and continue to become engaged and explore.

*Felipe*

**Background.** At the time of the interview, Felipe self-identified as a 20-year-old Mexican male who was studying mechanical engineering at a local community college, hoping to soon transfer to a four-year university. He identified with a “lower-middle class” background during his time at N4N. He started attending the Boys & Girls Club in third grade and participated for 10 years in total. Felipe’s musical interests were primarily focused around playing guitar, and he also expressed a passion for cars and video games.

**Introduction to N4N.** Felipe started playing guitar when he was 10, introduced to the instrument through a local community college class that his mother urged him to join, making it feel like a “chore.” He played “on and off” after that and found himself becoming more interested in guitar later in high school, which coincided with the opening of N4N at the Boys & Girls Club. Since he was already a Club member, he was around for the studio construction and found himself drawn to the instruments and recording equipment. He helped build some of the furniture for the new space and was welcomed by staff to come and “doodle” on the new ukuleles they received. He participated daily in N4N for 2 and a half years and experienced “probably one of the best periods so far in [his] life.”

**Relationships with staff.** Felipe characterized his relationships with staff as “encouraging,” “supportive,” and “like a friendship.” At first, when he was learning guitar, he found himself discouraged, thinking things like, “I can’t do this. I kind of don’t want to do this anymore.” After engaging with the staff, he felt that “it was definitely helpful . . . because they never really were like, ‘you can’t play that’ or ‘stop playing it, you’re not doing it right.’ They’re very encouraging, so it definitely made it a lot easier.” Felipe described how staff motivated him and his friends to “always keep playing” when they noticed them “sitting

down doing nothing.” Staff would say, “Yeah, you can take a break, but like, you’re in here. Learn something. Do something.”

Felipe also described the value of the friendly, supportive environment he experienced with the staff at N4N, helping him navigate times where he felt “lost” and “didn’t know what to do with the rest of [his] life.” He and staff talked about sports, school, relationships, music, and more: “[Amir] was very very outgoing, very easy to talk to...I would talk about anything with him.” Felipe’s experienced the staff as “friends” with whom he could “mess around and joke.” He fondly recalled:

With everybody, it was always, like they were staff, but . . . to me they were like friends too, ‘cause it was just, we would talk to them, and we were hanging out with them pretty much every day, so we kind of just developed a friendship . . . just good guys to hang around with (laughter).

Since Felipe was older than most other N4N members at the time, he felt that staff were more “laid back” with him, which facilitated talking “about more things” and sometimes being “treated like staff . . . or kind of like volunteers.” Staff would trust him to “make sure the studio doesn’t catch on fire” when they would need to leave temporarily.

The close relationships that formed between Felipe and staff created an environment where he felt safe “to talk about more personal things.” During a time where he was looking for direction in life, he turned to staff for wisdom:

I would ask Jake and Amir and a lot of people who came by, ‘How did you know you wanted to do, say, music, or whatever it is that you’re doing now for like the rest of life? How did you figure out what you wanted to do?’ And they would tell me . . . whatever their story was.



Felipe reflected that his close relationships with staff were “probably one of the most important” reasons for coming back to the studio every day.

**Opportunities.** Felipe saw N4N as a place where he could “improve skills” because of “the environment, the people, and the staff.” The environment provided him “exposure” to instruments and instruction, where he could get “helpful tips” and where he “always had the opportunity to play guitar” and “could just walk to it, pick it up, and start playing.” Felipe also had exposure to a vast selection of instruments and musical production equipment he did not have access to at home or school, giving him more options for learning:

Besides [guitar] I don’t think I would have gotten exposed to [anything else] if wasn’t for Notes for Notes. . . . It’s just nice having options. . . . If there was something that I wanted to learn, I know I could come here and learn it.

In addition to equipment and instruction, N4N provided Felipe with structure after school and during summertime. He described how he did not participate in organized sports or marching band in high school, and therefore did not have any “extracurricular” activities. N4N gave him “something to come to and pass the time” after school with friends. Additionally, since N4N was connected to the Boys & Girls Club, Felipe had to opportunity to consistently eat after school and during the summer:

I kind of also joke that when I would come to the Club, that was like the only time where I’d eat meals at certain times of the day, ‘cause at home . . . whenever I’m hungry I’d eat, but when I come here, we’ll have snack time and then in the summer it’s lunch, so it’s kind of like a meal plan.

Felipe also benefited from opportunities that N4N provided from outside resources, especially during a time when he felt “lost.” For example, he had the chance to visit the Hot

Topic headquarters and create songs, attend a “downtown open house” event with guest speakers and musical booths to explore, and talk to “up-and-coming” and “big” guest artists who were brought into the studio. He explained:

We’d be able to talk to them, ask them how they got into music, what are they doing now, and kind of like the path they took. That was really insightful. Especially for me, at the time . . . just about to graduate . . . and you kind of have to decide what you’re going to do for the rest of your life: Are you going to go to college? What are you majoring in? What are you doing? So it was good to have the artists come in and kind of like give a different perspective.

**Physical and Psychological Safety, Accessibility.** Felipe described N4N as a “cool, laid back” place that “wasn’t strict.” Accessibility was not a problem for him, and he commented that it was “always open, always easy to get to,” as well as “pretty safe . . . easy to come in and out.” He took a city bus from school and was picked up by his mother at the end of the day. During middle and high school, he had easy access to buses after school, which dropped him off one block away from the Club.

Felipe contrasted his experiences at other places like school or swimming classes to the stress-free environment at N4N:

It was a nice place to come to. I always felt like, I didn’t feel like bad or anything, coming here; I never dreaded coming here. Like I feel like with school or swimming classes, I was like, ‘Ah, I don’t want to go through this.’ But whenever I would come here, it was always fun. It was never like a drag coming here. . . . We would joke around, just hang out and talk. . . . There was nothing stressful about it.”

Felipe described how N4N and the Boys & Girls Club was a “safe” place where he would consistently choose to go after school, rather than hang out with what he referred to as his “troublemaker” friends who did “stupid things, just to put it bluntly.” He recalled:

A few of them, they smoke, they would go drinking now and then . . . and I remember a lot of times they would be like, ‘Oh, you know, we are going after school to go do this or do that.’ And I was like, ‘Oh no, I’m going to the Club.’ I guess it was like the alternative, instead of doing that, go here. And it was just a good time. . . . [N4N and the Club] probably made it a lot easier not to like go do any of those things, ‘cause I was always here after school. I never was exposed to that stuff often enough to really just be like, ‘Oh, you know, actually I am curious.’ Or, ‘Sure let’s go do this or do that.’ So I feel like it was definitely very helpful in the sense that it was always the option go to . . . straight from school.

**Freedom of expression.** In previous music classes, Felipe did not feel like he had autonomy in his choices:

Notes for Notes, in terms of expressing yourself, was a lot better than the programs that I took part in . . . ‘cause in both the world drumming and the guitar class, we didn’t get to choose [the type of music] we played.

These experiences stand in contrast to his experiences at N4N, where he did not feel like it was “mandatory to come.” He felt that the environment was “very laid back” and “wasn’t something strict.” Because N4N was “more unstructured,” it “worked” for him. Lessons were available if he wanted them, but if he wanted to “just talk” then that was an option too. He explained, “I feel like we had complete freedom to choose whatever we wanted to play.” Compared to his school music classes, he felt N4N was less “limited” and a “much easier”

place to learn songs that he heard on the radio; such requests were met with enthusiasm and statements like, “Yeah, let’s learn it. Let’s learn it together.”

Felipe felt that the N4N environment was free of judgement, which allowed him to openly express his emotions. He explained:

If I wanted to learn like a soft love song or something . . . Jake would be like, ‘oh yeah, that’s a good song. I like it.’ So it wasn’t like, ‘oh, so you like *that* kind of music? Hmm, interesting.’

It was this freedom of song choice that helped Felipe express his emotions:

If I was feeling sad or something, I was like, ‘Oh you know, I want to play this certain song.’ Or like, ‘I’m feeling pretty good today. I want to jam out on a pretty fast paced rock song.’ I feel like that’s . . . one way I kind of like express myself, or kind of like show my emotions. ‘Cause I feel like sometimes . . . I try to mute my emotions. At least like expressing it through normal means . . . like talking about it or whatnot. . . . It’s sometimes kinda hard to talk about those things, at least for me, so I think it’s much easier to learn a song that you feel like the lyrics kind of express how you’re feeling at the time. . . . So I felt like that was definitely one way that I could express myself. If I was, say, sad at the time, it would help get through it.

Felipe noted that the “encouraging” environment he encountered regarding self-expression also extended to other members’ experiences. He recalled staff working with song writers and rappers, asking them questions like, “How does this make you feel?” or “Why do you want to write this song in the first place?” Felipe felt that staff “can like dive deeper into what the artists were thinking . . . and kind of show them how to put themselves into the music or the songs that they’re writing.” He felt that the environment was “very focused on

individualizing everybody and making whatever they did, them,” which he noticed encouraged others to express themselves, even when playing or singing about “heavy topics.”

### *Adeel*

**Background.** At the time of the interview, Adeel self-identified as a 19-year-old Muslim African American male. He identified as low-income and underserved during his time at N4N. Although he grew up in the Bay Area in California, he “bounced around a lot” between the East and West Coasts. He eventually returned to the Bay Area, which he stated felt like “home” because “there are actually people [there] who are like [him].” Adeel was homeschooled by his father who was a historian, and he also studied in a Quran program, where he was tasked with memorizing the “Muslim Holy Book.” His musical interests were focused primarily on rapping, creating beats, and recording.

**Introduction to N4N.** Adeel was introduced to N4N through his involvement at another non-profit, which had a musical component similar to N4N. He discovered this program through a member of his masjid, a place of worship for Muslims. The member, an “older guy” who rapped and “made beats,” reached out to Adeel to ask if he rapped as well. Later, they came together to create music, and impressed, the masjid member suggested Adeel look for a producer. He connected Adeel to an employee at the music program, and they started recording every other week. One day, they took members on a “field trip” to the Bay Area N4N location and facilitated an impromptu recording session. There, he met Shannon, a N4N staff member who became a central part of his experience. This was Adeel’s “first time making music in a group setting with other people,” which was “definitely the beginning of a lot for [him].” After this experience, he returned to N4N almost daily during his winter break and for the following three years.

**Relationships with staff.** Adeel referred to his affiliation with Shannon, the N4N staff he connected with most, as a “mentorship” and a “working relationship.” He recalled:

Me and Shannon were always working together, so like every studio session, she was there. And I guess there would be times we would record for mad long and then just have a conversation for like an hour. Yeah, she would push me to try a lot of different things. She influenced my style hella much.

Adeel attributed his musical versatility to his relationship with Shannon, who encouraged him to explore different “things,” or styles. They developed a relationship where they could be honest with each other, and Adeel expressed that he trusted her opinion:

There was a dope working relationship. I knew that she knew my stuff, and I knew she knew her stuff. . . . If I am ever making decisions about music or anything, I send her that stuff, I hit her up, and I ask her things.

In addition, he felt that Shannon valued and respected the work they did and created a “laid back” environment:

What I really liked about my spot was it was just Shannon, and Shannon was like mad down to earth, laid back, and just like chill. Like it felt like making music with one of the homies. . . . She really treated the kids there like she was like, ‘I’m making music with a musician.’ Not like, ‘Oh this is like a youth that I’m helping with their art project.’ Like she really valued what we were doing and helping us grow.

For Adeel, Shannon helped “foster energy” to create a comfortable environment conducive to music-making:

And to me . . . that relationship with your engineer is like the most important thing. ‘Cause that fosters the energy to create the best music . . . especially if you’re gonna

be talking about some deeply personal stuff, like you gotta be cool with that person, to like have the right vibe and feel comfortable expressing some wild shit (laughter). . . . Me and Shannon just had a dope working relationship, and I didn't have that with anyone else.

Adeel expressed that his experience with Shannon was different than “other spots” he used to go to, which made N4N special for him:

There were other spots that I stopped going to, just ‘cause it was like a pain in the ass. Like, people clearly didn't value or care about what you were doing. It was just like a job. And Shannon was never like that.

He explained that, while others “didn't really get [him] or [his] experience or where [he] was coming from at all,” Shannon created a “comfortable space” to “just create.” When Adeel found himself “a little shuffled” with an issue at a N4N fundraiser, N4N staff “had [his] back,” which made him feel like they cared about him:

Zach and Shannon had my back, and that was huge. ‘Cause it's not just in your words, it's in your actions. Like, y'all legit put your jobs in an awkward position to have my back. That was huge for me. . . . There's so many non-profits that I've dealt with, you know, making music with youth, and like Shannon and Zach really cared about the youth and the music they make. . . . They really went above and beyond this job. Like, they did way more than they had to do, and that was huge, ‘cause you feel that. And you can tell, like, ‘Aw man, these people actually care about my shit.’ That was like the biggest thing.

**Opportunities.** Adeel's experience at N4N, compared to other music programs he had explored, was enhanced by several new opportunities. For example, at N4N, he had more

studio time: “At [another program], I would have like a 30-minute window, an hour window, like every now and again. But Notes for Notes I could book whole sessions. . . . Sometimes I’d be there for like 6 hours, recording.” He also had access to knowledgeable staff: “There’s someone who will run the session for me. . . . That was huge; having two people who really knew their stuff, to work with and to make beats. That was dope.” His first exposure to N4N on the field trip exemplified another way the program provided new opportunities:

That was also my first time also making music in a group setting with other people, where we made a beat. Before that, I would just be on YouTube, finding beats or just writing verses myself. So that was definitely the beginning of a lot for me.

At N4N, Adeel learned skills that he took with him into his future as a musician, like running a studio and working with others. He explained:

I would help Shannon a lot. There would definitely be times where my session would run out, and Shannon would be like, ‘You could just kick it if you want.’ I’d just stay, run other sessions, and help other kids with stuff. So yeah, I know how to like run a studio completely now, off of my time there, just being in it all the time. . . . Also, that showed me how to work in a studio with people . . . and like not step on people’s toes when you’re making music together.

The leadership roles that Shannon provided for Adeel helped him learn these new skills, and it also inspired him to consider future career paths: “One day, though, I do plan on having a studio . . . just having an open session for young musicians.”

Additionally, Adeel valued the opportunity to make professional connections, generated through N4N:



I made mad connections. Like I still get shows off of like older people who I would run into at the Boys & Girls Club, you know. They'll just hit me up, like, 'Hey, yo, I'm doing this event, you should perform.' Yeah, just having a spot where you come in and people recognize you every time you'd come in was cool.

In addition to having a "place to make music," Adeel appreciated "the relationships that [he] made as a result of being there." He reflected:

Now I just know mad people and have mad connections, and I haven't been to Notes for Notes in almost a year, but all these people now, I have like a network of all these people who like still hit me up for shows, still see my music, repost my stuff, know people who know people. And that is just, can't put a value on that.

**Physical and Psychological Safety, Accessibility.** Adeel lived in one part of the Bay Area, and the N4N studio was several miles away in a different part, creating an accessibility barrier. He navigated this by using a public light rail system. For tickets, sometimes he would "get money here and there, doing odd jobs, helping people out," and other times he would "hop" the entry gates. He explained that "location and finances" were barriers, and that where he lived, "there was nothing like that. . . . There was nowhere where I could just go and record." Despite the challenges, he felt that "it was hella accessible" and made good use out of the commuting time, always practicing, writing, and listening. He explained, "It could have been more accessible if it was [closer], but I mean, I wasn't mad at that. I just wanted to record and just like didn't have options."

Adeel described N4N and the Boys & Girls Club as a place that was "huge for [his] mental health" and felt like "home." He expanded:

Especially towards the end, I felt very at home. I would go in the kitchen at the Boys & Girls Club and like check what food they had and stuff. So yeah, it was like, I was extremely comfortable there. . . . After a while, that felt like my house almost.

Adeel portrayed N4N as a “chill space for when [he] needed it” during “stressful” times:

It definitely gave me a spot to be at when stuff was stressful. . . . I would be there hella often. . . . It was huge for my mental health. It gave me a spot to be that was calm and was away from everything. And when I was there . . . it kind of forced me to focus on nothing else ‘cause I had to focus on my music.

During a period of his life when he was “super disappointed,” having a “very tough time,” and “wanted to leave Oakland a lot,” N4N functioned as a reprieve for him:

I was just mad. Having mad issues with people I knew, falling out with lots of people. And I was just like, wanted to be gone and then I couldn’t, and I was stuck here. So at that time I was at the studio all the time. . . . I found a way to be there. . . . So yeah that time, I needed that.

**Freedom of expression.** Before N4N, Adeel would “not talk about personal problems in [his] music.” By the end of his experience there, he was writing and rapping about his personal life, which felt like “a lot of pressure to just release.” He reflected on his “artistic growth” and how “it was a long journey to get to that point,” but “ultimately it was worth it.” He felt encouraged by Shannon “always drilling it through [his] head to talk about real stuff.” He came away with the message that “some of your best music is gonna come out of struggle,” a sentiment that he “definitely developed at N4N.” The following quote illustrates how this concept became a part of his lived experience:

That was a part of my artistic growth, was learning to express my whole life as an artist, and not just this one part. You know, ‘cause I think when I started rapping I was very much like a conscious rapper. Like, I wrapped about this thing, and that was it. And then as I grew, ‘cause art was a means I think of dealing with a lot frustration. You know, with like going through puberty and becoming a Black man and not like a Black child. And then you’re like, it’s a whole other scope of stuff you deal with, and it just comes at you all at once. So most of my stuff early on was dealing with that, but then, you know, there’s other things in your life that happens that are like familial things, issues with friends, you know? Just other stuff. And I wrote about all of that, yeah. And that was the main way of how I dealt with most things, even till now, yeah. And I learned all that, you know, and became comfortable doing that [at N4N].

He explained that, at N4N, he could “fully express” himself “because of Shannon, mainly.” This was something he felt at N4N and not at other studios: “That was our relationship where I could pretty much express any damn thing, you know? . . . The other studios I didn’t go to as often because I didn’t real feel like that as much there.”

Adeel also found himself attending N4N more often than other programs because he wanted to focus on music rather than other things:

[A different program] was also a social justice non-profit, so there was tons of other stuff they always wanted us to do. And I was always like no, this stuff is cool, but I am here to make music. At Notes for Notes that was the only thing.

Another music program offered through a public library provided space and equipment, but Adeel felt that it lacked instruction. In contrast, Adeel felt that N4N “provided” members “the means to learn.”

Adeel was confronted with the limits of freedom of expression at N4N when he used the word “Cracka” in his lyrics: “I think the only way I felt like I wasn’t able to express myself at Notes for Notes was there was a time they made a rule you couldn’t make slurs.” He felt that he was using certain lyrics in a “historically conscious way,” yet he was guided away from using that terminology. He expressed:

But if I’m making a song about like the stress being a Black man, or if I’m talking about police brutality, like I’m gonna call police pigs or I’m gonna call someone a Cracker if they’re doing Cracker behavior, you know what I’m saying? So I understood the place it came from, but I felt like that was something where I was like, ‘they don’t get the experience and the depth of the artistic expression’ and they’re just like, ‘oh that’s not PC and we don’t want that.’ You know? But when it came down to it, like in the studio though, we still did it.

Adeel explained that the rules at N4N were: “you can’t glorify drugs and you can’t glorify violence.” However, he added that staff “did give people a lot of wiggle room, as far as, ‘Ok, if that’s where you come from, we’ll give you a little space.’” The limits of “certain types of music” permitted at N4N “was a shame” for Adeel, yet the flexibility from staff allowed members to “break the rules,” depending on their individual situations. Adeel reflected: “That was the only time I ever felt like I couldn’t express myself, but I still did. And after a while I felt comfortable. . . . Other than that . . . I always felt like I could express myself.”

### **Thematic Analysis Results**

Following the specified steps in Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis (2006), the most parsimonious way of organizing the key program components that contributed to an

overall successful experience at N4N resulted in three primary clusters. Those are program role, alumni role, and staff role, as perceived and experienced by the research participants and as conceptualized by the researchers. As shown in the thematic map (See Appendix G), each main cluster comprises four related themes that underscore the most significant factors of each role. Notably, all three main clusters are represented within the same triangular plane, as their interaction is conceptualized as synergistic in creating a successful experience. Following a successful N4N experience, alumni expressed an interest and ultimately a commitment to pay it forward, understood as passing on their newly acquired skills, knowledge, and experience to a future generation. This is represented in the thematic map as a theme that extends beyond the role of alumni while in the program, and therefore outside of the bounds of the triangle.

### ***Successful Alumni Experience***

This section represents the overarching sentiment expressed by alumni interviewees that their experience at N4N was meaningful and worthwhile. Interviewed alumni were selected specifically for their successful engagement, which was defined by recruiting staff and which was reflected in positive alumni accounts of their experiences at N4N. Analysis of the alumni interviews resulted in the conceptualization of successful alumni experience as a mutual outcome of the program role, alumni role, and staff role. An important, organic byproduct of the successful alumni experience at N4N was an interest, a commitment, and, ultimately, a joy in paying it forward.

### ***Program Role***

This cluster represents how Notes for Notes as an organization, according to interviewed alumni, contributed toward successful alumni experiences. It is specified by four themes detailed below.

**Making resources and opportunities available.**

The systematic analysis of the alumni narratives identified the importance attributed by research participants to N4N and its ability to provide a wide range of resources and opportunities. Noticeably, these are resources and opportunities that alumni had not experienced before engaging in the program and ranged from access to instruments and recording equipment to connections with local music networks. For example, Benjamin reflected: “Pretty much everything in the studio I never would have had access to. Everything from the piano to the recording booth to the production side, using the mixers, MIDI keyboards . . . just every single resource.” Another participant, Daniel, described how he was offered a full scholarship at a local college of music through his connection to N4N:

The head of the song writing department at [a local] College of Music . . . actually walked in here, this studio, N4N. We sat right here on these couches. I talked to her about my life a little bit, my background, my experience, and showed her a couple of songs. And actually her and Amir—the program director . . . at N4N—they walked together in the next room . . . and Amir came back, and he was like, ‘Yo man, you’re not going to believe what happened . . . she just told me that she wants to give you a full scholarship for school.’ I was like, ‘No way!’

Daniel also described how opportunities to perform arose through his relationship with N4N, which provided him public exposure and enhanced his understanding about the music industry:

I got referred to perform . . . for this ceremony that they hosted in City Hall. . . . I also performed at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July concert. It was more than 1000 people . . . . Notes for Notes also helped me get paid for some of the performances that I've done . . . I would never have had the chance to do that, if it wasn't with the right direction. How to promote yourself, how to talk about yourself, how to manage yourself . . . . I ended up learning how to network, how to talk to people and get gigs.

Some alumni spoke to their disbelief of the caliber of opportunities provided through N4N. For example, Benjamin had two music tracks featured with prominent "A-list" bands, which was "an amazing opportunity to have under [his] belt" and "something that [he] never thought [he] was gonna do." He expanded on the impact of sharing the joy from these "crazy" opportunities with family: "When I could come home and tell my dad the stories that I had, and how I was able to perform for a hundred people and having them all cheer me on, he was super, super proud." Another alum, Sam, reflected on his opportunity to play in a local farmer's market band, which was brought on by a connection to N4N and his new ability to play the drums and guitar:

That opportunity was brought up only through Notes for Notes. It wouldn't have happened any other way. He came into this studio, and he recruited me, and it went from there. It's pretty cool. But it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for Notes for Notes, definitely. And if it wasn't for the staff, yeah, I wouldn't have learned drums or guitar.

Another alum, Adeel, also noted the value of making supportive "mad connections" through N4N, which over a year later, still gets him shows: "I have like a network of all these

people who still hit me up for shows, still see my music, repost my stuff, know people who know people. And that is just, can't put a value on that.”

Marina experienced a different type of resource provided by N4N, related to educational opportunities. This example speaks to the broad range of opportunities that interviewed alumni identified as offered through N4N:

Another good opportunity that I had was being invited [by N4N staff] to [a local] college of music open house. . . . I went with my mom, and we got to see a lot of the classes, how some of the students work there, the classes and instruction that you can take, the scholarships that you can sign up for, and being able to get degrees . . . . So I think that was also a really good opportunity because it helped me being able to think about me possibly transferring there from the community college that I'm at right now.

### **Boys & Girls Club collaboration.**

The collaboration between N4N and the Boys & Girls Club was identified by participants as an important component in bringing about a successful experience. Specifically, matters such as the perception of the Boys & Girls Club as a “cool place to be all the time after school” contributed to alumni feeling connected to the space; it was “not only the studio” but that “both programs were so dope.” Meaningful relationships with Boys & Girls Club staff enhanced this connection, which in turn created an opportunity for exposure to N4N. For example, Benjamin described how he felt supported by the Boys & Girls Club staff, which led to later involvement at N4N:

The Boys & Girls Club changed my mentality on [expressing feelings]. They actually encouraged me to talk to my dad, and my dad actually stopped drinking for a lot of



years. And then from that, yeah, I kind of just grew up here at the Club. And then after that, I started getting more involved with music. Because music, for me, has always been . . . a nice little get away from the rest of the world.

Others noted an especially supportive role that the Boys & Girls Club, partnered with N4N, played in their lives. For example, Daniel experienced his family being welcomed during holiday events, creating “so many unique, genuine memories” that had a “huge impact . . . over the years” which resulted in feeling “so tight with the Club and Notes for Notes.”

When the interviewer asked Daniel about the Club and N4N he elaborated:

I like to like promote them because had it not been for the club accepting the studio, this studio would not be here. . . . the staff from the Club and from the Notes for Notes studio kind of joined together to work on trying to get more kids here, so they have built relationships themselves.

Another alum, Adeel, spent most of his time at N4N recording and placed a high value on the program’s focus on making music. However, his involvement in N4N expanded beyond this because of the program’s integration with the Boys & Girls Club and the environment, making him feel at home and contributing to his desire to return:

They were all mad cool. Towards the end, everyone at the Boys & Girls Club knew me. I was cool with everyone there, and everyone was real nice. . . . Especially towards the end, I felt very at home. I would go in the kitchen at the Boys & Girls Club and like check what food they had and stuff. So yeah, it was like, I was extremely comfortable there. Actually, after a while, that felt like my house almost.

**Safe, practical location.**

Another dimension within the program role that contributes to successful alumni experience consists of the perception by research participants of N4N and the Boys & Girls Club as a safe space and their experience of it as easily accessible after school, especially in relation to the location of their schools and other extracurricular programs. The ease of transportation and the familiarity of the neighborhood contributed to the consistent and successful engagement of alumni. For example, Daniel noted, “Right in front of the school they have . . . public transportation for the city . . . so it was pretty convenient to have that to come here. It was pretty easy for me.” Another alum, Emilio, explained that he would take the bus with his friend after school, which “loops around the city for a bit and then lands right at City Hall,” which is less than a block away from N4N. Benjamin also spoke to the convenience of location as a motivator for him to attend: “I really enjoyed coming here, so the fact that it was not far away at all . . . made it like, definitely I need to come. Because I could be involved in something much bigger and it was literally a block away.”

Alumni commented on how the safe location kept them “out of trouble,” compared to alternative places they might have spent their time after school. For example, Daniel explained:

I grew up in the hood, you could say . . . like you can’t be walking around after 7 . . . but here [at the N4N location] you can be walking at 11 or midnight and nothing would happen, but you can’t be doing stuff like that [where I grew up]. So yeah, like, it kept me out of trouble too I guess. . . . It’s a pretty safe neighborhood.

Felipe added that his option to attend N4N and the Boy & Girls Club after school contributed to the ease of turning down alternative suggestions from peers that he considered “troublemakers.” He expanded:

I would say it was partly Notes for Notes and just the club in general. ‘Cause I guess I would say probably like for a few years I was hanging out with troublemakers. . . . And I remember a lot of times they would be like, ‘Oh, you know, we are going after school to go do this or do that.’ . . . I would just say that I’m going to the club or going to Notes for Notes when that was open. I guess it was like the alternative, instead of doing that, go here. And it was just a good time. I guess, I was going to say I wouldn’t attribute the club or Notes for Notes for doing that, but actually thinking about it, it probably made it a lot easier not to like go do any of those things, ‘cause I was always here after school.

**Free.**

Most of the interviewed participants identified as coming from a low-income family or as underserved during their time at N4N. Access to equipment, instruction, and a musical space at N4N—that would have been otherwise unavailable or unaffordable—contributed to increased enthusiasm, gratitude, and unique and expanded opportunities to learn and engage with staff. For example, Sam reflected:

Just having access to all the stuff in there. . . at home, sure I have a guitar, and I have maybe an amp and a cord, but I mean that’s not much. If I went to Guitar Center, I could have the same thing there, you know? Just being able to come into a place where everything is there and you can pick up any instrument you want and just learn, then that’s something that I feel you can’t get anywhere else. And you just have people there who are willing to help you learn, it’s like, ‘What?!’ You go to Guitar Center, that’s not going to happen. And if you go to school, you only have one teacher, you know? And then you have a whole bunch of students that are also trying

to learn, so you don't get that one-on-one experience, and it's not, I mean here you get quality, you know? And that's something I feel like is hard to get anywhere else. And the other thing on top of that is, if you're going to the Club, the music part is free! So it's just, why not? It's so beneficial. It's awesome. Yeah. If I want that one-on-one experience, then I gotta pay somewhere else, but you go here and it's just free. Similarly, Marina expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate at N4N for free, which she was uncertain would be the case when first exploring the option of joining: Especially because I'm able to come here without having to pay a fee. And for myself, not even knowing if I would be able to afford even a single penny of it. Because as it is, I'm barely going to be starting a café job, and who knows how much that could even be for me to survive within a month's worth of life?

Additionally, Benjamin noted how his family's income limited his access to much of what N4N offered for free:

Pretty much everything in the studio I never would have had access to. Yeah, everything from the piano to the recording booth to the production side, using the mixers, using the MIDI keyboards. . . . I grew up a low-income family. We can't afford the nice things. My family, we've always been paycheck to paycheck. . . . We try our best to do what we can with whatever we have. And what I had was old drum sticks and a practice beat pad from 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and that's it. That's all I had.

### ***Alumni Role***

This cluster, specified by four themes detailed below, represents how alumni contributed toward their successful experiences at N4N. In combination with the role of the program and its staff, alumni contributed to their successful experience by overcoming

barriers, openly expressing themselves, integrating knowledge and skills, and consistently committing to improvement.

### **Overcoming barriers.**

Analysis of the participant interviews indicated that successfully engaged alumni used creative solutions to circumnavigate barriers related to accessing the studio. Alumni brought homework into the studio and completed it before playing music, “burned” the rubber off their scooter wheels when bus rides were unaffordable, and made use of the extra travel time to improve their lyrics—doing anything in their power to get to N4N and make time for participation. As an example, Marina recalled:

I would make the time, no matter what I had. If I had practice, or if I had school, or if I had homework to do, I’m like, ‘I can do it later, or I can just do it earlier. I can figure something out to put some of that stuff aside and be able to come to the studio and make time for that.’

Another way in which alumni overcame barriers to participation is through dedication to academic achievement. With encouragement of N4N staff, alumni worked hard to fulfill their academic responsibilities so they could utilize the resources at N4N. This dedication is illustrated by the following quote:

Benjamin: I failed pretty much the majority of all my classes, so by the time I got to my senior year when I found out about Notes for Notes, it was three years of school that I had to make up in one year. I took about 21 courses that year, and I aced all of them. . . . I would take night classes Tuesdays and Thursdays after school.

Interviewer: And what motivated you to start pushing harder academically, do you think?

Benjamin: Primarily the Notes for Notes staff because every single day they would ask, ‘Did you do your homework?’ . . . They showed me that education was first . . . that I needed to just push myself to make myself better . . . make sure I had everything I needed done for my responsibilities. And that’s what pushed me to really just finish school on time. . . . Even if there were distractions and I wanted to go out, I was doing my homework . . . and then from finishing my homework, I was able to utilize all the resources here at the studio.

A further way alumni overcame barriers to participation was by making use of their travel time to enhance their experience at N4N. Instead of treating transportation as a barrier, it was reconceptualized as an opportunity to engage with and digest their experience at N4N. Adeel’s following account illustrates this process:

Altogether, it was like an hour trip there. . . . I would just like practice writing on the way there and practice what I was going to record on the way there, and then on the way back I would want to listen and then write more stuff. . . . Yeah, it could have been more accessible, but I mean, I wasn’t mad at that. I just wanted to record and just like didn’t have options.

### **Self-expression.**

Another element of the alumni role that analysis indicated contributed to a successful experience at N4N was an openness to self-expression and vulnerability, which created opportunities for emotional growth, processing, and connection to their selves and others. For example, Daniel expressed increased awareness that “music is very intimate,” which helped him “let it be free” and “produce more content.” At first, this did not come easily, but as he “worked really hard” on his music “delivering [his] feelings” and writing about “personal

things,” he noticed that his lyrics connected more with others. Sam illustrated how his experience of self-expression through music helped him connect to others as well:

That’s one part that’s really awesome about instruments. . . . sometimes the most powerful type of playing is when you just have a cadence out of nowhere . . . and it might make the crowd go wild. . . . Especially in church, if you just stop playing and you only have vocals or something, or you have like a moment of silence, sometimes that’s the most powerful noise in the room. So it’s really cool being able to express yourself when you’re playing.

Alumni described how they utilized music as a means to connect to their own emotions in novel ways. For example, what helped Marina “express [herself] even more” was that “sometimes [she] wouldn’t have to say anything, but [she] could write it,” which was a “really huge thing” for her. Similarly, Emilio reflected that, through music, he found a way to identify and express his emotions: “I got a 96% on my calculus test, and I came in here and got on the drums and I was playing pretty loud. . . . I guess I was just happy, and I wanted to bang on something.” Likewise, Felipe identified how his song choice reflected his mood at the time and helped him “get through it” or “let it pass;” if he was feeling “sad” or “down,” he would “want to play a certain song, like Mad World.” Conversely, if he was feeling “pretty good” he would “want to jam out on a fast-paced rock song.” Felipe’s musical self-expression enhanced his capacity to connect with his emotions and supported his growth as a musician, as illustrated by the following quote:

I feel like that’s one way I express myself, or kind of like show my emotions. ‘Cause I feel like . . . I try to mute my emotions sometimes. At least like expressing it through normal means. . . . It’s sometimes kinda hard to talk about those things, at

least for me, so I think it's much easier to learn a song that you feel like the lyrics kind of express how you're feeling at the time.

These accounts highlight how successfully engaged alumni interacted with the opportunities provided through N4N to create personal, meaningful experiences. Expanding on this concept, one alum, Adeel, described how he “grew from a place where [he] would not talk about personal problems in [his] music” to “just knowing that some of your best music is gonna come out of struggle and going through your stuff.” Notably, this growth was facilitated through interactions with staff, who were “always drilling it through [his] head to talk about real stuff” and that “people want to hear songs about [real stuff].” Adeel's role in this interaction was his willingness to become vulnerable and persist throughout the “long journey” that guided him to share his personal music with others. He reflected:

It was a long process to get to. I'm a very private person, so it kind of went against everything I was used to. Doing that in music, it felt so weird. . . . It's like woah, that's a lot of pressure to just release that with no prior warning, you know? It was a long journey to get to that point, but ultimately it was worth it. And at this point . . . if the song is good and I don't feel like it's negative . . . I'm gonna to release it. Like, I'm not gonna let that stop me, you know?

### **Integrating Knowledge and Skills.**

Analysis of participant interviews indicated that another important dimension within the role of alumni was the integration of knowledge and skills acquired through involvement at N4N. Successfully engaged alumni reported that they actively absorbed knowledge through observation of staff, processed the meaning of their educational opportunities, and developed ways to apply their experiences to life outside of the program. This effort to move



beyond skill acquisition to a broader use of their interests and talents demonstrates how alumni played an important role in their successful engagement. For example, Sam described how, through N4N, he “learned how to play the instruments” and “made a lot of good connections with the staff and even networking outside of the Boys & Girls Club” which helped him “expand [his] musical interests outside of the club.” Similarly, Felipe noted that his learning experience at N4N “was not only about music” but also a “more enlightening experience” about himself:

When I hear music it just reminds me of how it used to be at the studio every day . . . so loving and caring. . . . Before that feeling, I came to the Club solely to learn the music. But after the feeling . . . it wasn’t just about music anymore. It was about life. About how to implement music in my life, and how to implement the feelings I get from music in my life.

Through observation of staff, Daniel learned “how to promote yourself, how to talk about yourself, how to manage yourself.” He expanded, “I learned about the music industry at a young age . . . and nonprofits too. Because being with the staff, I would just kind of hear from them and their knowledge and hear the ways of networking with different people.” From these experiences, Daniel drew the conclusion that “at one point you’re kind of an artist and you’re also a product, so you kind of have to show both sides,” demonstrating that he integrated his learning experience into an increased understanding of the music industry.

By observing staff at N4N, Adeel was able to better understand how to operate a studio and work with others. His experience helped him eventually develop his own home studio, as well as aspire to run an “open session for young musicians.” He reflected:

I think being there I learned a lot, just even by being in the environment, like observing. Like, I could run a studio at this point. Also, I would help Shannon a lot. . . . I'd just stay, run other sessions, help other kids with stuff. So yeah, I know how to like run a studio completely now, off of my time there, just being in it all the time... And also that showed me how to work in a studio with people and . . . not step on people's toes when you're making music together.

### **Sustained Engagement.**

Analysis of the interviews indicated that alumni also contributed to their successful experience through sustained engagement; going beyond mere participation, engagement was demonstrated by the interviewed alumni through regularity and quantity of attendance, persistence to improve despite challenges, and self-reliance to remain involved. For example, Adeel recalled how long he would record at N4N and how much music he produced there: "I'd be there for like 6 hours sometimes recording. . . . I always had something to record. I have like hundreds of songs on their hard drive over there." Similarly, Benjamin's account illustrates his commitment to participation, which started at the onset of his discovery of N4N and its mission:

Adam explained to me what Notes for Notes does . . . and that was very moving for me. And I guess through this, I was just able to just switch everything else off at life and just be here at the studio. I would want to be here for hours . . . just coming here every single day. . . . I was always here after school, always here late at night, hours 'till they closed. I was here every single day, learning something new.

Alumni demonstrated sustained engagement through perseverance when confronted with challenges. For example, before N4N, Sam described that he had played music but

“wasn’t really committed” because he had “never had the opportunity to really explore and learn how to play.” After he was introduced to the studio, he started experimenting with different instruments and found that he was “really bad” at the bass. With the assistance of staff, Sam persevered through exploration of the bass, guitar, and finally to the drums, which he “learned pretty quickly, and then ended up becoming pretty good at.” Felipe had a similar experience, although he encountered more obstacles which demanded more persistence:

I’d say the challenge for remaining involved was sticking with an instrument and not getting discouraged. . . . You kind of have to get over that hurdle of initially not knowing anything and not being used to how your hands are supposed to move...those early stages of just learning any instrument is tough. It kind of easily discourages you when . . . you’re missing notes . . . and then you’re like, ‘I can’t do this. I kind of don’t want to do this anymore.’ . . . But definitely that initial push in the beginning when you’re first learning was kind of like the main hurdle of not wanting to come back. But I still did, because I mean, you have to learn eventually.

Marina demonstrated sustained engagement by making time for N4N “no matter what.” Given that she was a returning member whose mother influenced her decision to leave N4N years earlier to focus on academics, she saw her second chance to participate as an opportunity to “rely” on herself to be consistently involved. She stated, “It’s now more my responsibility because it’s now my choice in how serious I want to take this.”

### ***Staff Role***

This cluster represents how staff contributed toward successful alumni experiences at N4N. In combination with the role of the program and alumni, staff contributed to successful

alumni experiences by creating a nonjudgmental space, cultivating a secure environment, providing guidance and encouragement, and demonstrating commitment to their jobs.

### **Creating nonjudgmental space.**

Analysis of the alumni narratives identified the importance attributed by research participants to N4N staff and their ability to create a nonjudgmental space where alumni felt “accepted,” “comfortable,” and “appreciated,” the result of which was interpreted as permission to express themselves freely in “intimate,” “silly,” and “passionate” ways. Notably, alumni compared their experience at N4N to other settings (i.e., home, school, other ASPs), with a consensus that N4N staff excelled in their efforts to accept participants nonjudgmentally. Daniel’s following account illustrates how staff acceptance helped him and other members feel attracted to N4N and “be themselves:”

There was no judgement. . . . As a kid, you kind of want to be accepted, so that was a huge one for the staff to be like, yeah man that’s cool. . . . So I think that’s a lot of what attracts the kids. Like at home they can’t really be themselves, like actually. I was really not the person that I wanted people [or] my parents to see [at home]. I would kind of be more introverted, quieter. But in here, I was a different person.

Adding to this, Daniel underscored that “music is very intimate” and that “when you’re being judged about what you’re writing, it’s kind of hard to come up with more content.” Comparing N4N to other ASPs, he summarized the shared sentiment that alumni experienced N4N staff as active in creating a judgement-free space, which helped members feel comfortable enough to openly express themselves through music:

In music, I don’t think you ever want to make anyone feel like they’re gonna be judged for what they say, because then their music will really come out super

generally-based because they would be afraid to actually say the intimate parts. . . .

Being at [another popular ASP] . . . you're still kind of in the same environment that you were in high school, so you still feel judged. Even some of the kids [at N4N] kind of make their little groups . . . but it's really less common because the staff here are really good on checking that out, making it a very free judgement zone.

Benjamin's account of his introduction to N4N exemplifies how staff created a nonjudgmental space upon arrival, which motivated him to return and continued throughout his experience. He first "exposed" himself by singing for staff "on the spot," instead of judgment, he was met with encouragement and respect, which made him feel "really appreciated...just as an individual." As he continued at N4N, he "tested the waters" on what he could "say, do, or show" and found that "the feedback was always positive." He wondered, "Am I gonna be judged if I say I want to do this . . . want to sing this?" To his surprise, "There was never anything!" He expanded on how staff helped him feel comfortable to express himself freely, stating:

They always brought that comfortable atmosphere, being able to express myself, no matter what it was. . . . To know that Adam saw me not only as a 17-year-old kid in high school, struggling to keep his grades up [but that] he saw me as more than that—he saw me as an individual with potential—and knowing that somebody can see me like that and really utilize everything in how I feel and make sure that I know how to use that as fuel, that's definitely what made me more comfortable.

Alumni also highlighted how N4N staff "embraced diversity" with "no judgement," which "made it feel like a home" and conveyed the message that all musical styles and members from different backgrounds were welcome. Benjamin, for example, commented

how N4N staff created an environment or “zone” that was free of discrimination as soon as someone entered:

Those interactions with all the other alumni . . . even the other members. Just to have that support no matter what, the minute they walk in here, there’s no discrimination. Whether they discriminate you outside of the studio, that discrimination was gone the minute they stepped in. And to know that this studio can have that impact on a lot of people’s lives in that way, whether you’re a member or not, to see that, to know that, that’s a whole different type of movement.

Marina’s perspective of staff creating a nonjudgmental space was juxtaposed by her past discouraging experiences being bullied in school and participating in a play production. Marina perceived staff as aware and welcoming of who she was as an individual, which encouraged her to overcome her fear of judgement and continue with music:

Marina: That was when I had met Alex, and he was somebody that really pushed me a lot because I think he really knew that music was something that was very passionate to me, but I was very scared because I was always afraid of being judged. Especially because, coming from somebody that has been bullied a lot as a kid . . . it’s very tough to think that you can do something on your own knowing that doing something that you loved before, people judged you for it.

Interviewer: Wow. And so how does that feel, the difference between your experience in the play versus here?

Marina: Oh, it’s a huge difference. It’s a very huge difference because I am now welcomed, not just as a regular person but as myself. I’m not just like another student,

I'm not just another member, no, I am being looked at as Marina, and as a person who's coming in here to work and to do something about it.

### **Cultivating a safe and secure environment.**

Alumni underscored the importance of staff making N4N “feel like home,” which fostered feelings of safety that not only impacted the musical environment but also provided “emotional support” and a space for members to freely express themselves. Analysis of alumni interviews indicated that the secure environment fostered by staff created a safe space from which members could explore personal matters through music and conversation. For example, Adeel explained how “every time [he would] come into the studio” he would have personal conversations with staff which “fostered the energy to create the best music,” and which was “the main reason [he] didn't go to other places.” Benjamin noted how “other kids would come [to N4N] only because they felt safe:”

They felt there was something outside of the Boys & Girls club—not even outside of Boys & Girls club—outside of Notes for Notes, that was bothering them . . . kids coming in here just to vent, to talk. . . being able to just express themselves more than they could to anybody else.

On a more personal note, Benjamin described how the persistence of N4N staff communicating positive messages made him “feel so safe and at home,” which gave him another “sanctuary” beyond music to ground his developing yet unsolidified “positive outlook on everything:”

Having that run through my head every day, having them help me understand that I am more than what I think I am made me feel like I was such a better person. . . .They helped show me that my upbringing does not decide my future. . . .I was able to see

life a whole lot better . . . and that just made me feel so safe and at home that I can have this place—not only music; I would always think of music as my sanctuary—but then the Notes for Notes studio became my sanctuary . . . and because of that, I’ve always felt so safe.

Similarly, Adeel expressed that N4N “definitely gave [him] a spot to be at when stuff was stressful,” which was “huge for [his] mental health” and where he “could just focus on [his] music and nothing else.” Marina expanded on this concept by focusing on how N4N felt personalized to her, which helped her process emotions and access imagination and creativity:

There were times when I would just have bad days, or I would feel stressed or upset about something, and I could just easily come here and just like listen to music, start writing stuff, or to just do recordings of my favorite songs...it kind of felt like this place was like my own room. It was my own room, it was my own space, and it was something that I was able to do with my own time, with my own imagination, my own strategies, my own studies . . . and to be able to create things I really liked.

### **Providing guidance and encouragement.**

The interviewed alumni identified staff’s guidance and encouragement as an important role in their growth and successful experience at N4N. Specifically, alumni recounted that staff took note of members’ specific interests and motivated them to pursue their passions, even if it seemed unattainable to members at the time. Messages such as “working harder every day,” “not letting go of dreams,” and “moving forward” were communicated to members by staff consistently and systematically. Benjamin expanded:



[Staff] always encouraged me to be better every single day, than you were the last.

The same life lessons that my father gives me, the same life lessons they were able to give me . . . to not let go of my dreams and not give up. Keep trying until you get it, and if you can't, wait, do it again. Don't need to stress, don't need to rush.

Sam described how staff exposed him to new software and provided guidance through modeling and instruction, which led to increased involvement:

When I was here in the summer and Amir was here, he was helping me to learn the software and stuff. So he really got me into Ableton cause I saw him doing a whole bunch of cool stuff on it. And it encouraged me to also get myself involved with the program . . . and then he lent me some software, so that was pretty awesome, and since then I've been experimenting in trying to create music.

Further demonstrating the theme of providing guidance and encouragement, Marina recalled, "Adam was always there to really support me and to push me to do better... and to try new things." She recalled an opportunity where a guest artist at N4N asked for volunteers. Adam volunteered her, and she sang, "even though [she] was scared out of [her] mind." She reflected, "With Adam, I think the relationship that I loved having with him was it was just very hard-working and very dedicated . . . just being able to push myself to do things that I didn't think that I could before." Marina felt that Adam provided encouragement through his recognition of her potential, despite her fears and reservations:

I think he really saw that there was something in me, and I think he was just trying to figure his way to get me to do it...Especially since I was always somebody who was very scared to do anything after I had been bullied for doing what I love...So he was somebody that I think kind of brought me back down and reassured me, like, 'No you

can do it. You just need to get over it and move forward from it or make it something that pushes you to do more.’

Felipe’s perception of staff guidance and encouragement expands upon Marina’s personal account, underscoring how staff emphasized “diving deeper into what the artist was thinking” and “individualizing everybody and making whatever they did, them:”

[Staff would] kind of like dig at [N4N members] . . . show them how to put themselves into the music or the songs that they’re writing. . . . I think Adam would also say, ‘It’s your song. It’s something you’re doing. Express that. It’s you. It’s not something else. It’s not somebody else. . . . It was very focused on individualizing everybody . . . so it was a very encouraging environment to do that.

#### **Genuine Commitment to Job.**

Analysis indicated that interviewed alumni perceived staff as genuinely committed to their jobs, which was seen as another distinguishing quality that contributed to a successful experience at N4N. Alumni experienced staff as people who “actually care” about members, rather than working “just for the money,” which had the effect of alumni feeling valued and returning. For example, Daniel reflected “They were actually taking their jobs seriously, and you can tell the effects of it now: it’s that I’m back here again talking about it because it was that much of an impact. These staff were really genuine.” Sam echoed this sentiment:

[Staff] always seemed pretty dedicated to what they do. I like that about them. But you know, I feel like it’s really about the kids because the fact that they’re putting in the time, and you know, as a staff here, I see how other staff behave, and you can just kind of sense when someone is doing it just for like the money or something. Or if they actually care, you know? And they care about the kids.

Adeel experienced the staff member, Shannon, as a genuine person who “really treated the kids there like she was like, ‘I’m making music with a musician.’ Not like, ‘oh this is like a youth that I’m helping with their art project.’” He noted that “she really valued what we were doing and helping us grow.” This feeling, in turn, motivated Adeel to return and helped him engage:

There were other spots that I stopped going to, just ‘cause it was a pain in the ass. Like, people clearly didn’t value or care about what you were doing. It was just like a job. Like I get it’s a job, but at the same time, if I record, I need my stems so I can release this song. And Shannon was never like that. . . . It’s understandable if it’s just a job. . . . I’m not even necessarily mad at people who are like that, but it’s like, man, when it’s not that, it’s like wow! You’re hella dope. Like wow, props, respect.

Some alumni recognized staff in their commitment to go above and beyond their required job responsibilities, which exceeded expectations and made them feel like staff “actually care.” For example, Benjamin lauded the dedication of staff who showed support by attending important events, like his high school graduation. He exclaimed, “For them to come to family events, that’s crazy. That’s insane! . . . For them to come, meet my family, my grandmother’s cooking, that’s a whole different type of feeling to have for these gentlemen that work here.” Similarly, Adeel compared his interactions with N4N staff to other ASMP staff and reported a substantial difference; what motivated Adeel to return and become successfully engaged at N4N—as opposed to his several other options—was the feeling that staff demonstrated a genuine commitment to their job:

Shannon and Edgar had my back, and that was huge. ‘Cause it’s not just in your words, it’s in your actions. Like, y’all legit put your jobs in an awkward position to

have my back. That was huge for me. . . . There's so many non-profits that I've dealt with, you know, making music with youth, and Shannon and Edgar really cared about the youth and the music they make. . . . Like, they really went above and beyond this job. Like, they did way more than they had to do, and that was huge, 'cause you feel that. And you can tell, like, 'Aw man, these people actually care about my shit.' That was like the biggest thing.

### *Pay it forward*

Much like a planted seed that—once sprouted and matured—keeps on giving, the systematic analysis of the participant narratives identified that alumni were impacted by their experience in a way that influenced them to “give time back to the community.” Alumni who entered the program with limited musical skills, once further developed, expressed a desire to move beyond learning and pass on their acquired knowledge to “the community” and “the next generation” of N4N members, seeing “the chain just kind of keep going and going.”

This theme is illustrated through Daniel's following account:

At one point, where I got pretty good at guitar, I started teaching the kids . . . and that was kind of an eye-opener for me. I was like, now I'm kind of doing what I wanted to do, like actually make an impact with music, not just make it. . . . I feel like Notes for Notes made that feeling for me, like subconsciously, because like someone was there to help me, so now I kind of want to help others . . . cause I think when you give back more, you receive more back. And that's kind of what they taught me. . . . Giving back to the community, always giving back. Trying to use my talent, not waste it. Use it for good.

Alumni found other opportunities to pay it forward. For example, Benjamin volunteered at N4N for a year and tried to spread the positivity he felt while at N4N. Drawing from his experiences with staff, he stated, “I really wanted to implement how Amir was in my life, and so to this day I’ve always just tried my best to be positive.” Even after giving back through these opportunities, Benjamin expressed with gratitude, “I still owe so much to Notes for Notes just because they helped me shape myself as an individual and as a person, and to this day, as a young man.”

Sam’s experience “paying it forward” manifested through his voluntary participation in a local farmer’s market band. Notably, his reflection on this experience alludes to a mutual exchange between the community he was serving and his own rewarding feelings, illustrating Daniel’s previously quoted notion that “when you give back more, you receive more back.”

Sam elaborated:

Through Notes for Notes, I learned how to play the instruments and I made a lot of good connections . . . so it really helped me to expand my musical interests outside of the Club and pretty much pay it forward because I was able to do a service to other people through the music program . . . it really helped me I guess to give back to my community in a way, which seems funny because you’re just playing an instrument, but really it’s had a really big impact on my life.

Another alum, Adeel, found himself in an “older mentor role” after participating in N4N for some time. Once his recording sessions were finished, he would “just stay, run other sessions, and help other kids with stuff.” His experience learning how to run a studio and help other members at N4N gave him the dream of “one day” planning on “having a studio . . . and just having an open session for young musicians.” In the meantime, Adeel utilized his

mentor role to “always be bringing people in and having these bomb jam sessions.” He gained so much out of this experience that he found himself “flirting with the idea” of applying to become N4N staff and continuing to pay it forward.

### **Member Checks: Participants’ Feedback on Findings**

Member checks were conducted to support claims of methodological integrity, as well as incorporate participants’ feedback on findings. Results suggest that the methods were successful in gathering thick, rich, and accurate descriptions of alumni experiences and also offer some additional, important insights. Five out of seven participants responded to the invitation for a member check, and three followed through to completion. Of the three who were interviewed (Benjamin, Sam, and Felipe), all three indicated that their experience was captured with accuracy. For example, Benjamin stated, “I was reading through everything and it was very, very spot on . . . . It described my whole experience and attitude, and if I were to explain it to somebody that’s how I would explain my experience.” Similarly, Felipe reflected, “I feel like you guys really captured what it was like for me to like, mature up to where I was, which I personally think is awesome.”

Unprompted, Felipe and Sam both reflected on ways they have been paying it forward to youth in their community since the original interview. Felipe stated, “I stayed even after college. . . . I volunteered there and I did as much as I could to help them out, even work for free basically just because I really believe in and love the program and exactly what they’re doing.” Additionally, Sam, who was still working at the Boys & Girls Club at the time of the member check, revealed that N4N was no longer operating at his Club’s location, leaving behind an unstaffed room with instruments. He reflected on the changes and how he had responded to them:

It's kind of sad because now the kids have equipment like they did before, but no one really knows how to use it. And I try to go up there from time to time and try to share my knowledge with them that I gained from N4N, but I can't be there consistently because I'm still working . . . now there's no one to help teach that and help them become better musicians, so that kind of sucks. It's unfortunate for the kids who have a lot of potential in terms of music, but they can't manifest it cause there's no one there to help them grow, and that's what N4N did, at least for me."

Sam continued to reflect on the impact of N4N leaving his Club's location in relation to youth engagement, highlighting how his retrospective account has given him perspective of his own experience:

Now I can kind of reflect and see how even having (pause) in middle school I tried playing instruments but I kind of fell out of it. I feel like maybe this is a bigger example of how when you don't have the proper guidance, that will disengage the students. They won't be as interested. Like, I lost my interest because I feel like maybe I didn't have the right mentors, but when I did get in the program at N4N, I was able to really get back into music and figure out that I really enjoy it. So for the kids we have now, they do enjoy it, but they don't have the right people running it so they're not really getting any better, and you can kind of see where it's frustrating for them as well. I try to help with drums and guitar and stuff like that, but they can only practice so much and they don't have really anyone else helping them out, so it won't be too long before we see another group of kids who are not that interested in music or who don't end up going as far as they perhaps could have.

Underscoring the need for professional staff to provide musical expertise for youth who are learning, Sam continued:

[N4N] inspired me to try to carry on or fill that role that they had for me when I was in the program, but what we really need is them because I can't do it because I'm not a staff there, and I don't have the background that they do.

Felipe, who had recently become a father at the time of the member check, also reflected retrospectively on how N4N helped him “mature” and learn “life lessons” that had a lasting impact:

The [N4N staff] didn't just help me learn how to work with music, they kinda taught you life lessons. They were strict on making sure you do your homework, all your responsibilities you gotta do . . . and I feel like, with them doing that, I kinda did get my life on a better track. Obviously, I found myself with my own place, with the baby, and working as much as I could to make sure I could provide for him. And I feel like they definitely did take a huge part in that.

Another noteworthy retrospection from Felipe offered a possible explanation for N4N's departure from the the Boys & Girls Club at one location. He reported that a Club staff member who “was honestly probably the main heart of the Boys & Girls Club” and a “mentor” for many members resigned from his job, which “made a huge impact on the N4N studio because all the youth stopped attending.” Felipe speculated that N4N may have decided to leave that location after its target demographic (“teens”) started dwindling, as word-of-mouth among youth spread that Joaquín was no longer there.



## Chapter V: Discussion

The current study provides insight into the experiences of successfully engaged underserved alumni who participated in the after-school music program, Notes for Notes. Specifically, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how interviewed alumni experienced key program components, including meaningful relationships with staff, access to previously unavailable opportunities, program accessibility, physical and psychological safety, and freedom of expression. Additionally, the findings reveal how participants perceived the interaction of program, staff, and alumni roles as contributing to their successful N4N experience, leading them to “pay it forward.”

With respect to relationships with staff, results indicated that the “super close” and “caring” relationships alumni developed with N4N staff were integral to their successful experience, supporting the importance placed on participant-staff relationships throughout the After-School Program (ASP) literature. Alumni consistently cited their relationships with staff as the most important factor in making them feel safe, supported, and confident in their growth as musicians and young adults, in addition to keeping them interested and excited about music. These findings are consistent with research that suggests that supportive relationships with staff members can increase enjoyment and engagement in ASPs and contribute to feelings of achievement and self-efficacy (Grossman et al., 2007; Walker & Arbreton, 2004).

Results from this study indicated that alumni viewed N4N staff as nonjudgmental “friends,” “family,” and “role models,” which created an environment where alumni could express themselves authentically and feel supported while doing so. These findings are congruent with Keller’s (2005) assertion that engaged ASP participants typically see their

mentors as caring and reliable, as well as Rhodes' (2004) finding that ASP staff have a unique advantage to engage with youth in a less formal and constrained way than teachers and parents. Alumni in this study compared their experiences with adults in other settings like home, school, and other ASPs, and they consistently reported feeling that N4N staff were unique in promoting a safe space that was based on acceptance and encouragement. For example, Marina illustrated how her experience in one extracurricular program differed significantly from N4N. At N4N, staff "saw that there was something in [her]," which helped Marina build her confidence, stay engaged, and feel valued. Daniel offered another example, explaining how he could express himself and be "silly" without being judged at N4N, compared to being at home, where he "can't really be talking about problems in [his] music" without his parents questioning him. Consistent with literature on Positive Youth Development (PYD), which asserts that all children have strengths and assets that are worth promoting and nurturing, rather than deficits that require fixing, these examples support how positive and sustained adult-youth relationships can help foster youth development (Lerner, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005; Ward & Parker, 2013).

Of note, the strong quality of alumni relationships with staff seemed to be pivotal in creating educational opportunities, which increased engagement and resulted in the development of new skills. Adeel, for example, experienced his relationships with N4N staff not only as supportive and nonjudgmental, but also as a mentorship in music-making, studio management, and working collaboratively with others. This example is congruent with Sanford and colleagues' (2010) finding that informal mentorships can lead to enhanced personal and social development in underserved youth, as well as generate educational opportunities. It also illustrates an important contribution of the current study to the ASP

literature: the *interaction* between the program’s opportunities, committed staff, and engaged alumni contributed to a successful alumni experience (see Appendix G).

Regarding opportunities and access to them, findings from the study also suggest that alumni, the majority of whom identified as underserved or low-income during their time at N4N, benefited from access to previously unavailable opportunities. Exposure to musical instruments, recording equipment, instruction, and performance opportunities that would have otherwise been inaccessible or unaffordable for most participants generated excitement, inspiration, and curiosity that kept alumni motivated and engaged. Opportunities to participate in program potlucks, holiday events, and fundraisers also increased involvement of alumni families, which fostered a sense of community and furthered engagement. As illustrated by Daniel’s individual case analysis, his family spent so much time with N4N and Boys & Girls Club staff that he referred to them as his “second family.” The program recognized his family’s financial limitations and provided opportunities they would “never have . . . at home.” His experience offers support for Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) assertion that opportunities to belong and integration of family are two important program features that contribute to positive youth development. In addition, these results contribute to a better understanding of how programs can engage youth who have the greatest need coupled with the fewest resources.

With respect to accessibility to the program’s location, findings indicate that N4N was, for the most part, easily accessible to alumni, which reduced barriers to participation and increased the consistency of their engagement. The location of N4N, housed within the Boys & Girls Club, was perceived as safe and convenient. Six out of seven alumni considered the public transportation between their school and N4N readily available and

affordable, and five out of seven had other extracurricular activities in the same neighborhood, making it easy to walk to N4N afterward. Additionally, six out of seven alumni already participated at the Boys & Girls Club before N4N was established, highlighting the impact of the collaboration between N4N and the Boys & Girls Club. The existing infrastructure of the Boys & Girls Club provided visibility, a reputation of safety and familiarity, and convenient community location that was already in use by alumni. Consistent with Pelcher and Rajan's (2016) finding that one of the most important barriers to adolescent youth engagement in ASPs is accessibility, these results provide support in a complementary manner: ease of access was closely associated with successful alumni engagement.

Alumni who did encounter accessibility obstacles found ways to remain involved. They reframed the barriers or put in extra effort, and in doing so they created a positive feedback loop of benefiting from the program and reinforcing their motivation to continue. As examples, one participant used his longer commute to rehearse lyrics, and another rode his push scooter 30 minutes each day when he could not afford bus fare. The common factor among both participants is that they both wanted to be at N4N (i.e., "I want to be in the studio. I want to make music;" "I just wanted to record and just didn't have options. . . . I found a way to be there.") which outweighed the barriers they encountered and, in turn, increased their successful engagement. This finding parallels MacIntyre et al.'s (2017) study on Self Determination Theory (SDT) which focused on how the theory's construct of intrinsic motivation played a role in creating a feedback loop between a desire to learn, increased effort at practicing, development of perceived competence, and an increased desire to continue learning. However, this dissertation also expands upon the sometimes-criticized constructs of intrinsic motivation and autonomy that characterize SDT (Markus et al., 1996)

and that focus on the effort of the individual, which may be more applicable to certain cultures that value individualism. N4N alumni in this study highlighted their own efforts, but they did so in the context of their relationships with others at N4N. Findings indicate that alumni were able to overcome barriers in creative ways *because* they valued their relationships with staff, which generated motivation to return “no matter what.” In other words, motivation to overcome barriers to access by alumni in this study needs to be understood contextually. That is, motivation was derived from a relational context characterized by valued relationships built with staff that led to alumni creativity and perseverance to consistently attend N4N.

Regarding physical safety while at N4N, the most important finding was the absence of safety concerns from alumni. No alumni reported feeling threatened or physically unsafe while at N4N. On the contrary, they felt that staff created a “safe” space where discrimination and violence was not tolerated. However, the lack of concerns does not indicate a lack of significance but rather—as Eccles and Gootman (2002) put it—a prerequisite to positive development that was met by the program and staff that created a setting for feelings of psychological safety.

More significant from the perspective of alumni were the *feelings* of safety at N4N, which they described using words like “home,” “nonjudgmental,” and “sanctuary.” Staff played an important role in making alumni feel safe to express themselves openly, which was a novel experience for many and illustrates the synergy within roles represented in the thematic map (see Appendix G). Alumni underscored the importance of feeling safe and accepted at N4N, allowing them to grow musically as well as personally. The interplay between the intimate nature of personal lyrics, motivation and guidance from staff for alumni

to express themselves, and the nonjudgmental environment in the studio helped foster close relationships and develop mutual trust that brought out emotional expression. Expanding on previous literature promoting the benefits of music for youth (Caterall et al., 2012; Klassen et al., 2008; Saarikallio & Erkkila, 2007), this dissertation offers a deeper understanding of how ASMP participants experienced the benefits of musical expression in a context characterized by supportive relationships with staff, as well as a willingness to be “vulnerable.”

With respect to freedom of expression, psychological safety also played an important role, especially when compared to home, school, and other ASP settings experienced by interviewed alumni. In addition to feelings of nonjudgement, many alumni considered N4N as a “home” or their “own room” where they felt “empowered” to “create whatever [they] want.” The setting was experienced as “welcoming” and less “rigid” than school—yet importantly with some structure and boundaries—which increased curiosity and exposure to new instruments and reduced the stigma of openly expressing emotions. Compared to other settings, this freedom was new to many alumni, so they “tested the waters” and experienced only “positive feedback” within certain yet broad limits and structure.

Results from this study support Larson’s (2006) finding that freedom and autonomy, balanced with some structure coming from trusted staff, can help youth stay engaged and challenged to grow. It also offers examples that contribute to increased depth and complexity of Eccles and Gootman’s (2002) assertion that “appropriate structure” is important for adolescent development in ASPs, which is operationalized through “limit setting, clear and consistent rules and expectations, firm-enough control, continuity and predictability, clear boundaries, and age-appropriate monitoring” (p. 90). Although alumni did note some structure, rules, and boundaries, findings from this study suggest that N4N’s emphasis on

freedom of expression created an environment that felt “more open” and therefore more flexible with its rules about lyric choice. In the context of musical expression, especially for underserved alumni, many of whom reported experiencing adversities they incorporated into their music, limiting freedom of expression through “clear boundaries” or “firm-enough control” may have felt oppressive or invalidating. This study offers examples of how ASMP staff were able to operationalize “appropriate structure” in this context, while simultaneously validating and encouraging personal expression through music.

The balance of freedom and structure experienced at N4N by interviewed alumni also exemplifies the synergistic relationship between the program, staff, and alumni roles that contributed to a successful alumni experience. The program’s placement within the Boys & Girls Club, along with their distinct mission that encourages freedom of expression created a setting affiliated with built-in rules and structure while also providing opportunities for open musical exploration and expression. Within this context, staff operationalized the program’s mission through their encouragement of freedom of expression and nonjudgmental guidance, all while maintaining certain rules (e.g., discouraging the use of racial slurs, the overuse of cursing, or the glorifying of drug use). Alumni then engaged with the program and staff through testing the limits of what they could express, experiencing the freedom, developing musical knowledge and skills, and when comfortable enough, utilizing their skills to grow and express themselves in new ways. In this setting, alumni were encouraged to express themselves musically in a way that was congruent with their personal life experience: to “talk about real stuff.” Getting at the core of N4N’s philosophy, this illustrates how staff communicated the message to members that their program experience was about their lives and that their lives matter. This reconceptualization of what makes a successful ASP

experience underscores the interaction between the setting and all active participants, addressing what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) criticized as a tendency for scholars to discuss the setting without the child and the child without the setting. It also supports and expands Eccles and Gootman's (2002) assertion that it is the *process* of interaction that is critical to youth development (i.e., the process of program, staff, and youth interacting synergistically to develop together).

Given that participants in this dissertation were N4N alumni, a strength of this study was gathering retrospective accounts that reflect how their experiences influenced their lives years later, including how they were finding ways to “pay it forward” and exemplifying how their development at N4N contributed to program development. For example, after reaching adulthood and no longer participating as active members, many alumni reported returning to the program and passing on their acquired knowledge and skills to the “next generation” of members. This idea was reinforced during member checks, where Sam, who had become a Boys & Girls Club staff member, reported that N4N no longer existed at his Club location. What replaced it was a music room that was unstaffed, and Sam noticed that youth were not as engaged. His response was to volunteer his free time to share what he learned as a member because he saw the value of his experience and wanted to pay it forward. He sadly reflected that it did not feel like enough because the program structure, including trained staff and consistency was no longer there, highlighting the importance of opportunities for instruction and the interaction between all three roles—program, staff, and member—to create the opportunity for a successful experience.

Felipe, during his member check, also highlighted the reciprocal influence between the Boys & Girls Club and N4N. When word got around in the community that a popular



staff member left the Club, he noted that the youth stopped coming, which impacted the utilization of the Club as well as N4N. This supports the significance of the collaboration and interconnectedness between the two programs and provides insight into the process of youth accessing the program, as well as their motivation to come. When N4N was affiliated with this staff member, they seemed to benefit from his draw, and when he was gone, they felt it too.

### **Implications**

Notes for Notes seems to have made a unique, positive impact on each successfully engaged alumni included in the study. Findings from the interviews may be beneficial for other ASPs to incorporate into their own development, particularly related to the interplay between the program setting and mission, the staff who are hired to carry out that mission, and possible ways to foster participants' successful engagement with the program. This study highlighted the overwhelming importance placed on relationships with staff members that contributed to a successful experience and a willingness to grow through vulnerability, once comfortable. Feelings of safety, created by an easily accessible and familiar location, close relationships with nonjudgmental and supportive staff, and an environment that encouraged open and authentic expression, all supported youth development.

Important feedback received through interviews and member checks underscored the significance of the program organization executed by N4N, as well as the impact of its relationship to the Boys & Girls Club. From the perspective of one alumni during a member check, when N4N relocated—leaving behind an unstaffed music room—youth engagement and learning appeared to decrease, emphasizing how access to instruments and equipment alone is not sufficient in creating a successful experience. Other ASPs considering musical or

art additions to their programs may benefit from this finding by understanding the importance of relationships with trained staff in the development of skills and engagement. Furthermore, interviewed alumni reflected on their time at N4N as one part of their complete experience as a member of the Boys & Girls Club. The “family” they developed there included those affiliated with N4N and those who were only affiliated with Boys & Girls Club, which increased feelings of safety from which N4N benefited. These findings highlight the importance of the partnership between the two programs in creating a successful experience and is useful feedback for N4N, which has been expanding quickly and experimenting with stand-alone locations. It also underscores issues of accessibility and outreach to underserved populations, which is facilitated by the strategic placement of Boys & Girls Clubs in locations that are often already a part of the community accessed by potential participants and their families. Rather than creating an ASMP that youth need to seek out to participate, the partnership of N4N and Boys & Girls Club brings the music—and its many benefits—to them.

A related implication of this study—congruent with counseling psychology’s social justice perspective that emphasizes inclusion and equity—is the need to advocate for the availability of after-school programming within underserved areas of a given community, which can provide musical experiences, resources, and opportunities to youth who would otherwise not be exposed to them due to socioeconomic barriers or limitations. Furthermore, this study contributes to the dearth of literature that addresses marginalized youth in ASPs, as they are underserved not only on their most basic needs but also other needs, including access to artistic expression and research (Riggs et al., 2010). This study addresses the call from Riggs and collaborators (2010) for increased ASP research that focuses on youth in

need and which includes demographics, diversity of program participants, and issues related to program accessibility. More specifically, it adds to the paucity of research on ASPs related to music and the arts that serve this population and shows how several engaged alumni experienced key program components that led to a successful experience.

In addition to the specific experiences reported by alumni, findings from this study call attention to the effects of ASPs like N4N that extend into young adulthood and likely beyond. The individual case profiles and thematic analysis highlight some of the immediate, tangible impacts experienced by alumni, yet many of the findings may have broader implications for the development of long-term skills that can help lead to overall success in life and, in turn, can have a significant impact on societal improvement. For example, some alumni specified how their experience at N4N led them to pursue higher education or develop expertise to run a studio, with likely implications for the successful navigation of future educational and career opportunities. Alumni also illustrated how engagement in N4N kept them “out of trouble” and directed them toward a “straighter” life path, potentially increasing community involvement, educational attainment, and wellbeing.

Although the results from this study focus on direct alumni experiences of the program and its components, they also provide support for broader policy and have social implications tied to successfully engaged ASP participation. Specifically, many alumni reflected on their evolved roles from active youth members to adult helpers (and for some, eventually becoming staff members), showing a capacity and desire for leadership, mentoring, and community involvement. Others reflected retrospectively during member checks how the “life lessons” they learned at N4N helped prepare them for major responsibilities such as child rearing or working toward a career. These long-term benefits

extend beyond simply learning an instrument or gaining a technical skill, and the cases in this study provide thick, rich examples of how successful experiences in ASPs can plant and nurture a metaphorical seed that continues to grow its healthy roots into the fabric of society. These findings are important to consider when allocating (or rescinding) funding from such programs, as well as designing and developing similar ASPs.

### **Limitations**

This dissertation had many limitations. For instance, the use of an auditor was not employed. An external auditor is a researcher who can examine the process and product of the study from the perspective of someone who did not participate in the research process. Their purpose is to evaluate the accuracy of the study and whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). An external auditor might also review the tracks made of research decisions and activities. Although I originally planned to recruit an external auditor and create an audit trail, time and practical constraints prevented this from occurring; this may reduce credibility, confirmability, and trustworthiness of the findings.

Another limitation of this study concerns the implementation of the multiple case study design. Ideally, Stake (2006) suggests that a multiple case study is conducted in a team with a lead researcher and several other members. However, he also provides the caveat that dissertations often employ just a single researcher that does all the case studies. The team, in the case of this dissertation, included the lead researcher—who conducted, transcribed, and coded all interviews—and the senior researcher. The small makeup of the team provided the benefit of more thorough synthesis of the data while also providing the disadvantage of increased workload and fewer people to “examine the different interpretation of happenings”

(Stake, 2006, p. 18). Another limitation of multiple case studies is that the design does not allow researchers to offer directionality of findings, which has implications when drawing conclusions about alumni motivation. For example, successfully engaged alumni in this study noted that they did not mind taking public transportation to make their way to the studio, thereby overcoming potential accessibility barriers and increasing engagement. However, it is possible that because alumni were already successfully engaged, they viewed public transportation as readily available and affordable and were able to navigate obstacles to accessing the studio.

An additional limitation of this study is that while it was intended to be an exploratory study, some of the questions asked in the semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix D) were developed into organizational categories for the individual case analyses. This perhaps may have limited the open exploratory nature of the study by guiding the answers of participants into specific categories. The intent was to thoroughly explore the research questions, yet the direct connection between the research questions and interview protocol prompts may have limited participants' responses. For the thematic analysis, more distance was created between the interview questions and thematic map through thorough analysis of the data and the creation of distinct themes.

A further limitation of this study is the focus on relationships with staff, which neglects the relationships formed between members at N4N. Peer relationships, as emphasized in Sheltzer and Consoli's (2019) study, also played an important role in creating positive experiences for N4N alumni by helping to build social skills, increase confidence, and connect musically and personally with others. This would be important to study in the future to expand on different types of relationships and their impacts.

## **Future Directions**

Beyond the impact of peer relationships in ASMPs, there are several other dimensions that merit future studies. For example, during a N4N fundraiser performance, the chair of this dissertation's committee noticed the support and encouragement for N4N musicians coming from the parents in the audience. This generated a curiosity about parental support and their impressions of the impacts of the program on their children, families, and community. Parents' perspectives of their child's growth, program accessibility, Boys & Girls Club community in relation to N4N, staff relationships, among many other relevant topics would be a valuable contribution to the understanding of N4N's multiple impacts.

Another topic worth studying is how N4N staff present the program to inquiring youth. When alumni were asked what attracted them to N4N and motivated them to return, several cited their initial interactions with staff, who explained the N4N mission and what it provides. The current study offers insight into how staff have operationalized elements of the program's mission, and it could be relevant to expand on this by exploring how staff understand the mission and communicate it to Boys & Girls Club members and beyond. Studying this perspective could help deepen the understanding of how members are drawn to N4N.

Due to the limitations of a multiple case study, other research methods could also be employed to ask different types of questions and capture and define knowledge in alternate ways, with the goal of generating other useful research products. For example, future studies might expand on the current study and thematic map by utilizing grounded theory methods to develop a theory about successful ASP experiences. Additionally, the current study sets the groundwork for other forms of knowledge development such as quantitative studies or formal

program evaluations with the aim of measuring the range of impact in areas deemed important by developmental researchers, policy writers including city planners, and financial supporters (e.g., public sources such as Parks and Recreation departments, private foundations).

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## **Appendix A**

### **Participant Screening Protocol**

Criteria for Inclusion:

1. Participant is 18 or older
2. Participant is an alumnus of Notes for Notes
3. Participant has ceased participation in Notes for Notes for at least one year
4. Participant is identified by staff as a previously “successfully engaged” member of Notes for Notes

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **PURPOSE:**

Joshua Sheltzer and Dr. Andrés Consoli of the University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology invite you to be a part of a research study that explores your experience at Notes for Notes. The study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of certain program components, such as meaningful relationships with staff, access to previously unavailable opportunities, consistent accessibility, physical and psychological safety provided by the program, and freedom of expression throughout the program. You will be given the opportunity to reflect on your experience in the program retrospectively.

#### **PROCEDURES:**

If you decide to participate, we will ask you to complete a quick demographics survey and an interview about your experience with Notes for Notes. The interview should last approximately 1.5 hours and will cover topics related to your relationship with staff, your opportunities at Notes for Notes, how you accessed Notes for Notes, and how you felt while participating. Interviews will be audio recorded to facilitate transcription and analysis.

We will also ask you to be available for a follow-up interview at a later date, called a “member check.” This interview may be slightly shorter (1-1.5 hours) and is designed to ensure that we have captured your experience at Notes for Notes accurately. You will be given an opportunity to review your interview transcripts and provide additional information and reflection on your experiences.

Your total time commitment should not exceed four hours, including the demographics survey and both interviews. We expect that approximately between 5 and 8 participants will be involved in this study.

#### **RISKS:**

We do not expect that you will experience any risks or discomforts during this study. However, if at any time you feel uncomfortable you may discontinue your participation in the study.

#### **BENEFITS:**

While no direct benefit is guaranteed, we believe that your participation in this study will provide useful information about the impact of an after-school music program through the reflection of your experiences at Notes for Notes, which may improve future service for current and prospective members.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY:**

Your personal information will be stored in a locked office, and it will be kept confidential to the best of our abilities. In addition, the audio file of the interview will be password protected and only used for transcription and analysis purposes. Furthermore, your interview will be assigned a code to assure confidentiality. Information will only be shared with researchers

associated with the study, and if published, will not include specific identifying information. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, since research documents are not protected from subpoena (a legal request for the production of documents) and since your interviewer will be a mandated reporter. Please note that your interviewer is required to report any instances of child, elder, or dependent adult abuse that you may disclose during your interview.

**COSTS/PAYMENT:**

You will receive a \$20 gift certificate as compensation for your participation in each interview, for a total of \$40 in gift certificates. If you choose to withdraw before completion of half of the interview, you will be provided a prorated compensation of \$10.

**RIGHT TO REFUSE OR WITHDRAW:**

You may refuse to participate and still receive any benefits you would receive if you were not in the study. You may change your mind about being in the study and quit after the study has started.

**QUESTIONS:**

If you have any questions about this research project or if you think you may have been injured as a result of your participation, please contact:

Joshua Sheltzer, University of California, Santa Barbara, Department of Counseling, Clinical, and School Psychology, 2252 Gevirtz Hall, Santa Barbara, CA, 93106, (559) 623-3499, [jsheltzer@umail.ucsb.edu](mailto:jsheltzer@umail.ucsb.edu)

If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact the Human Subjects Committee at (805) 893-3807 or [hsc@research.ucsb.edu](mailto:hsc@research.ucsb.edu). Or write to the University of California, Human Subjects Committee, Office of Research, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-2050

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY. YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW WILL INDICATE THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT IN THE STUDY DESCRIBED ABOVE. YOU WILL BE GIVEN A SIGNED AND DATED COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP.**

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Demographic Information

Participant's name/nickname:

Primary language:

Ethnicity:

Age:

Gender:

Musical interests (type of instrument(s), vocals, recording, editing, musical genres, etc.)

Education level:

Current Employment:

During participation at N4N, did you identify as low-income, underserved, or at-risk? (Circle all that apply) Please explain:

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol

#### *Introduction*

- The purpose of this study is to gather information from Notes for Notes alumni like yourself to better understand how certain aspects of the program impacted your experience.
- We will be discussing your overall experience, and then exploring how you experienced other specific aspects of the program including:
  - your relationships with staff
  - the opportunities you experienced in the program
  - aspects of your experience related to accessibility in the program, as well as how you experienced the environment of the program
  - and your ability to choose what you could do or how express yourself while in the program

#### *Questions*

##### *Overall Experience*

- Tell me about your experience at Notes for Notes overall
  - How did you get involved?
  - How long were you involved?
  - What did you do there?

##### *Relationships with Staff*

- Tell me about the staff members you interacted with
  - What were your relationships with staff members like?
  - Who did you spend the most time with?
  - How important were your relationships with staff to your experience in the program?
  - What is your contact like with staff members now?
  - Is there anything else you would like to comment on about your relationships with staff?

##### *Opportunities*

- Tell me about opportunities provided by Notes for Notes
  - What types of instruments, equipment, instruction, or other resources did you have access to that you may not have had at home or school?
  - What types of performing opportunities did you have during your time at N4N?
    - Tell me about your experiences performing



- What types of other opportunities did you have, if any? (such as putting on a show, participating in events, meeting people, etc.)
- Is there anything else you would like to comment on about your opportunities at N4N?

*Accessibility and Physical/Psychological Safety*

- Tell me about your experience making your way to the studio(s)
  - How accessible was N4N to you?
    - How did you get there?
    - How often did you go?
    - What time of the day were you usually there?
  - In a previous study, many alumni reflected that N4N kept them “off the streets” and “out of trouble.” How does that resonate with your own experience?
  - Can you tell me about how you experienced the overall environment of N4N?
  - How did you feel when you were there?
  - Is there anything else you would like to add about accessibility to the program or you experience of the environment?

*Freedom of Expression*

- Freedom of expression questions:
  - Tell me about your experience expressing yourself musically while participating in Notes for Notes
  - Tell me about your experience expressing yourself personally while participating in Notes for Notes. For example, expressing your thoughts and emotions.
  - To what extent did you feel that Notes for Notes was a place where you could express yourself freely? What was that like? What was the program’s role in facilitating that?
  - When it came to what lyrics to sing, or instruments to play, what you could do when you were there, who you spent time with, etc... how much freedom did you feel you had in regard to choices you could make at Notes for Notes?
  - How was your experience at Notes for Notes, in terms of your freedom to express yourself and freely choose what to do, different in any ways compared to other ASPs you participated in or your experience at school?

*Concluding Questions*

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience at N4N in relation to any of the topics discussed today? Anything I missed?
- May I contact you in the future, between now and the next time we meet, if I have any further questions?

## **Appendix E**

### **Questions for the Pilot Interviews**

Our purpose is to explore alumni experiences of N4N. We are interested in the key components of a successful experience for participants like yourself. Now that the interview is complete, we are wondering:

1. What was this interview like for you?
2. Was there anything we did not ask you that you expected to be asked?
3. Are there any suggestions you may have?
4. Were any questions unclear?
5. Is there anything you would want done differently?

## **Appendix F**

### **Member Check Interview Protocol**

1. What were your overall impressions of your profile?
2. How accurate did you feel the interpretation of your experience at N4N was?
3. Are there any areas you would like to clarify or alter?
4. Is there anything else that stands out to you as important regarding your experience at N4N that was not captured in the profile?

## Appendix G

### Thematic Map of Successful Alumni Experience

