Whether they are painting murals, advocating for community policing, or encouraging artistic expression, each says that they can’t do what they do by themselves. They don’t shake their communities. They help shape through consensus, bridge-building, collaboration and relationships. Give everyone a voice, they say, and communities blossom.
Cornelius Johnson, Harrisburg City Council

Cornelius Johnson’s childhood and college friends are scattered in cities throughout the U.S. But when he had a chance to work in Pittsburgh, he came home to Harrisburg.

“This is your hometown,” he says. “Come back. Sow some seeds. I can make it work in Harrisburg. Harrisburg’s my home.”

Johnson was elected to Harrisburg City Council in 2015, on his first try at elected office. He never thought about politics or public service as a student at Harrisburg School District’s Sci-Tech High School, or a toxicology major at Penn State University.

He returned to Harrisburg, leaving a supremely boring job writing specs for handling hazardous materials, to serve as city health officer in the administration of Mayor Linda Thompson. He liked the array of duties – handling restaurant inspections, helping manage lead abatement, battling a bed bug outbreak.

He also found that people approached him for help with other city issues, beginning his dive into government of the city where he was born, the son of immigrants from Sierra Leone and Jamaica.

Finally, he gathered friends for their thoughts on a city council run. He built a grassroots approach, elevating ideas from Facebook gripes to action plans.

“It wasn’t me running for council,” he says. “It was us running for council.”

Johnson’s not one for doing anything the easy way, so he dove into the city’s most fraught issue, chairing the Public Safety Committee. Working with city and police officials, plans are underway to launch a police cadet academy, immersing young adults into the department and career possibilities. He hopes to adapt a Harrisburg version of New York City’s Build The Block initiative, strengthening ties between residents and police.

“The more you are seeing someone and knowing someone, the more comfortable you are around them, and that’s what community policing is,” he says.

Johnson helped bring Books in Barbershops to Harrisburg, and on American Literacy Corp.’s 500 Men Reading Day, you’ll find him reading to Harrisburg School District students. He speaks in area schools, and recruits friends to do the same, so students can see their own potential in relatable young professionals.

“People have to hear those stories, people have to see those stories, people have to touch those stories,” he says.

When Teen Achievers meets at the Camp Curtin YMCA, he’s there, volunteering for the organization that introduced him to college tours, financial aid seminars, and leadership skills.

“They gave so much to me, and now I’m giving to them,” he says.

He now works a job he loves for a company he loves – food safety and quality assurance manager for Hershey Entertainment and Resorts Co. He is pursuing a master’s degree in public administration through Shippensburg University. He hopes that his work helps Harrisburg youth, especially at the consequential middle school years, see a place for themselves.

“Hopefully, I sow enough seeds that as I start to fade out, those places I planted my seed are reaping those benefits, and they’re able to come back and take my place, because people did it with me,” he says, adding, “Harrisburg is my heart and my soul.”
Megan Caruso and Jeff Copus, Sprocket Mural Works

The idea just popped up. Wouldn’t it be great to do 10 murals in 10 days? Seemed crazy, but in the world of Jeff Copus and Megan Caruso, crazy is no barrier. It’s a challenge accepted.

“So we started figuring out how we could make it happen, and it turned into 18 murals in 10 days,” said Copus.

Those 18 murals emerged from the Harrisburg Mural Festival in September 2017, sponsored by Sprocket Mural Works. Sprocket is the labor-of-love creation of Copus and Caruso. They met when each, separately, told Liz Laribee, the arts organizer who formerly lived in Harrisburg, that they wanted to start a mural project.

“She said, ‘Uh, you guys should meet,’” says Caruso. Together, they envisioned a city connected through murals.

“We love the city and we love art, and we both think art should be accessible to everyone,” says Copus. “Murals are so accessible. People stop and talk, and we interact with the community. They feel connected to the projects.”

Both are “ambitious people fixated about art,” Caruso says. “To come up with these ideas, normal people would say that’s impossible, or way too much of an overreach, but we both figure out how to make that happen, and we make it happen.”

Caruso upholds Sprocket’s esthetic excellence, Copus says. She is also an envisioner. “I’ve been collecting pictures of blank walls in cities for years,” she says. “They’re canvases to me.”

Both work artistic day jobs. He teaches art at Harrisburg Academy. At home, he and his wife have an infant son. She’s creative director for TheBurg. She learned to draw at age 6 from her grandmother, an artist who took her into the woods to sketch from nature.

“My dad has a drawing of the gnarly tree in front of our home that she drew, and she signed it, and I guess I also signed it because I helped,” she recalls.

Murals increase property values and attract neighborhood amenities, Caruso says. “I grew up going to art museums. I don’t think everyone has that ability to have to go to a special place to see art. It seems very privileged, so having public art can make it more accessible.”

As a college student, Copus thought art and design were the key to making people do things, but now, he puts more value in the process that creates bonds and relationships. As Sprocket, they draw from a deep well of support among volunteers and donors to give life to its projects.

“With murals, you see the change,” said Copus. “A lot of people are doing great things in the city, but you can’t always see them. With murals, people see the artists at work, and ask, ‘How can I help?’”

With all the “moving pieces” of Sprocket, as Copus calls them, the pair are taking time to consider next steps. They remain committed to “making Harrisburg a vibrant place to live through adding more projects and connecting the ones we already did,” he says. “I get a big smile when I see people walking around with our mural maps.”
As Shaun Bollinger steps out of his classroom, a student extends a fist for bumping. “See ya, Mr. B,” the young man says.

Welcome to Shaun Bollinger’s digital photography classroom at Cumberland Valley High School. He didn’t set out to become a teacher, but as he pursued higher education, his enjoyment of working with people – younger ones, especially – pulled him toward the classroom.

“My father was a teacher,” he says. “My sister’s a teacher. My aunts, my uncles. I have a huge family of teachers.”

Bollinger works hard to convince his students that the art world has a career for them, if that’s what they love. He brings in speakers and holds events spotlighting real people in the arts – many in area meccas for creative types, such as the production community Rock Lititz.

“The whole starving artist is something that people talk about, when I don’t even think it’s necessary to have that conversation,” he says. “Visuals are huge. Every company uses visuals. There’s avenues for these kids to do something with the arts with anybody.”

His decade-plus in the classroom spans a rapidly changing time in photography. “I’m interested to see where the field is going to go in the next five, 10, 15 years,” he says. “We could be teaching iPhone photography as a class instead of DSLR.”

There are the fundamentals to teach, of course, but he often thinks that his classes are “not necessarily about photography, but it’s more about building relationships, and using photography to do that.” For students, “it’s all about putting their own perspective into their work. If they can put their own perspective into it, it’s probably more meaningful to them.”

Besides, he adds, “if I had to grade projects of kids photographing trash cans and trees, I would go mad. But as soon as we start making it personal, I don’t mind grading. It’s fun for me to see how they’re developing their own visual voice in terms of their work.”

At the end of the year, Cumberland Valley School District hosts its annual, all-grades District Arts Festival (May 23, 2018). School choirs sing. Bands play. Seniors spend a week creating displays for their work.

“It’s a really big undertaking,” says Bollinger.

Sometimes, students lack secure relationships elsewhere in their lives, so the teacher can model “how to have a relationship as student to another student, or student to a parent.” The father of two children, a 3-year-old son and 6-year-old girl, tries to follow “the Christian credo of treat others as you would like to be treated. I hope they see how I interact with students on a daily basis and maybe use that same interaction with how they interact with anybody else they come across.”

As for the future, Bollinger has no idea.

“I like the unknown sometimes. I like being able to be flexible in the unknown. I’m not certain what’s going to happen with my course schedule next year. I’m not certain what’s going to happen with the photography industry as we go on, but I’m excited to see what happens.”
"No day is ever the same." So says Alisa Baratta, Executive Director of Third Street Alliance for Women & Children. Located in Easton, Third Street Alliance serves nearly 200 people daily and offers 13,000-15,000 nights of service annually to those in need. As director, Baratta oversees all of the programs the nonprofit offers, helping each individual live, learn and thrive.

Third Street serves its community in three capacities, providing shelter for women and their children, offering childcare services to 90-plus kids and adult day services, assisting those with disabilities.

As if that wasn’t already a lot to handle, Baratta also manages the facility’s 115-year-old mansion that houses the families that come through the program. For many of the residents of the mansion, the first step to getting back on their feet is to “find a safe landing.”

Once an individual is under the wing of Baratta and her dedicated staff, they are encouraged and coached through obtaining an education, job searching and acquiring childcare.

Baratta has witnessed many transitions over the years, some even come back as mentors. “So, it comes full-circle,” she says. “It’s a pretty special place.”

Businesses and organizations in the Lehigh Valley have been very supportive of Third Street’s mission. “We get a great amount of support from the community,” Baratta says.

Baratta works personally with individuals, helping people change their lives. When asked what keeps her going, Baratta says, “It’s the impact that you have on people everyday.”