



# Annual Report 2023

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility

A message from executive director Cassie Schwerner

## Active Listening as a Tool for Healing

I keep thinking about a comment that Morningside staff developer Lauren Neidhardt made at a recent gathering about our work in Central Harlem schools this year: “No adult on the planet knows what it’s like to be a child during and after – if indeed it is ‘after’ – a global pandemic.”

We had come together to talk about how to address what we are witnessing in schools in Harlem’s District 5, with whom we have an exciting partnership. Harlem has its own unique history of both strengths and challenges, of course, ranging from educational inequities to redlining.

What we are seeing in Harlem, however, we are also seeing in schools across New York City and beyond: At a moment when young people’s needs seem to be at an all-time high, the capacity of school administrators and educators to answer those needs is at an all-time low. The adults are facing their own family stresses, in addition to budget cuts, initiative fatigue, and demoralization stemming from our society’s disrespect of teachers.

One question kept coming up during our meeting: Have adults taken the time to really listen to young people? We in the education community have discussed the heightened levels of bullying, violence, conflict, anger, depression, and anxiety that we’ve collectively witnessed among young people over the last two years. But have we slowed down enough to really try to understand it?

We know that many of the struggles young people are experiencing stem from grief and loss, lack of connection, and environmental catastrophe. My own 21-year-old son recently confessed that he didn’t imagine ever becoming “elderly” because he’s not sure the planet will be able to sustain us in 50 years.



Young people are dealing with a distressing digital environment that most adults don’t fully comprehend. On the news, they are watching unspeakable atrocities unfold. And closer to home, they are witnessing a massive backlash that began under the first U.S. Black president and continues now in a culture war that opposes trans youth, African American authors, women’s reproductive rights, and even the teaching of empathy.

We know that this time calls for reconnecting. It calls for empathy and compassion – for both ourselves and others. It calls on us to collectively embrace joy and solidarity as key tools in helping us to metabolize the pain around us.

We also know where all this begins: **Active listening is the first step in healing.**

We have a team of 30 experienced staff who work in schools every day – facilitating trainings with teachers, coaching principals

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*Photo above: Cassie with a PAZ after-school student. Front page photo: Staff developers Nicole Lavonne Smith Johnson, Nelly Espina, and Adriana Guzmán-King.*



# How One Teacher & Her Students Built a Welcoming Classroom

Last year, Molly Heekin and her second-grade students in upstate New York together created a classroom where students felt they belonged – a place where they could fully be themselves, let down their guard, and be open to learning. In this class, children of varied backgrounds were encouraged to grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Molly looks back on the year with a sense of accomplishment and gratitude.

How did they do it? As the Morningside staff developer who has been supporting Molly and her school over the past few years, I spoke with her to gather some lessons learned.

## 1. A Weekly Circle Practice

At the start of the last school year, Molly says her students needed support on so many levels, “it was mind-boggling.” After three years of Covid, students came into the classroom not just with lagging academic skills, but with a range of social, emotional, and other challenges. Meeting her second graders where they were required building relationships, community, and trust at the onset.

So every week, Molly and her students circled up to get to know each other, while building their social and emotional skills. It was here, she says, that her students learned to wait their turn to share, as they practiced listening to their classmates. Students would later draw on these foundational skills again and again.

Over the year, in their weekly community circle, Molly taught de-escalation, centering and grounding techniques, as well as communication and problem-solving skills. As she got to know her students better, Molly was also able to provide personalized scaffolds to supplement these skill-building circles.

With time, students came to recognize that the circle was their space and took ownership.

They knew that all voices were invited into the space equally; they knew their turn would come and that they would be heard. The regular circle practice enabled them to develop a sense of trust in each other as they built their SEL skills.



## 2. Getting to Know Each Student

Molly's students faced a range of academic, personal, and family challenges. Some had recently immigrated to the U.S. and were still learning English.

Early on, Molly had one-on-one conversations with students multiple times a day. It was almost constant. The goal: to help students process their thoughts and feelings about all kinds of issues.

Instead of telling them what to do or not to do, Molly would listen for understanding, invite them to reflect, be introspective, and consider how to show up in class. What choices did they want to make and what supports did they need to be able to do so?

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# Going Deep, District-Wide, in Harlem



For the past two years, Morningside has partnered with Central Harlem's Community School District 5 and the Harlem Renaissance Education Pipeline on a project to bring "culturally responsive and affirming social and emotional learning" to the district's 23 schools.

The project is a precious opportunity to go deep and wide in a district that is committed to fostering healing and revitalizing the educational landscape. It's a timely antidote to the sadness, anxiety, loneliness, stress, and conflict so many young people and adults have been experiencing over the past several years.

We see the program as a model for districts and communities that want to take a positive, proactive approach to these challenges by establishing caring and supportive school communities.

Morningside's team, led by Dionne Grayman and Daniel Coles, is working with District 5 on two levels. First, we're providing district-wide training and support for those who are on the front lines of student trauma – including

administrators, social workers, school crisis teams, parent coordinators, and families. At the same time, each school is partnering with one of our staff developers to provide the particular support that it needs – from teacher training and coaching to direct work with students and parents.

Researchers who conducted a preliminary study of Morningside's work in D5 found that over 90% of participants valued the experience. "It makes you feel empowered to know that you're not alone," said one respondent. "I'm better prepared to promote empathy and understanding," said another.

The program is a rich one, made even richer by the special gifts of our staff developers. Note: This has always been the key ingredient in Morningside's special sauce! For example:

Nelly Espina, a 24-year veteran of Morningside, has become a member of the family at her District 5 schools. She has facilitated healing circles for staff and provided classroom coaching for teachers. She was also called on to introduce students to peer-to-peer learning around feelings, listening, assertiveness, and conflict resolution. Parents, especially newly arrived immigrants, found in Nelly a warm and willing ally. She worked over the summer to support caregivers who are English language learners and who wanted to be more involved with their children's education.

In her schools, staff developer Nicole Lavonne Smith-Johnson facilitated healing circles with everyone from parent volunteers and maintenance personnel to teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. She was especially proud to have hosted circles for paras, who expressed deep gratitude for having their own space. Nicole also provided peer-to-

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*Photo above: Project Director Dionne Grayman, with parent advocate Damaris Rodriguez, and staff developer Angela Polite.*



peer training for fourth- and fifth-graders, preparing them to lead and hold space for students in younger grades. Nicole says she is thrilled to work with the principals at her two schools, both of whom are deeply committed to collective care, communal healing, and centering joy. (Nelly and Nicole are pictured on the front page, along with staff developer Adriana Guzmán-King.)

We are excited about the work we're doing in District 5 – and plans are underway to spread this district-wide model to new NYC school districts in the coming year. ♦



*Photos from a workshop to foster SEL and healing in Central Harlem schools.*



In the process, Molly modeled active listening and supportive questioning. She also modeled that equity is different from equality. Her students were learning on so many levels in so many different ways – though the process was, as Molly says, “a lot,” especially in the first months of school.



### **3. A Corner of Their Own**

Molly invited her students to use a class “peace corner,” where they could collect and calm themselves – even if they’d come to class dysregulated because of issues at home or with friends. Here, students could apply some of the social and emotional skills they had been practicing in their community circle every week.

As one of Molly’s students explained, the peace corner helps “when we’re mad, sad, or wanting to punch someone.” Another student added that “It’s like a secret room where you can relax when you feel upset.” The peace corner gave students a space to go (always voluntarily) to collect themselves, so that they’d be able to return to learning in the academic classroom. It was also a place where students could address a problem with a friend rather than let it fester and taint the relationship.

### **4. Identity, Culture, and Empathy**

As students learned to listen to each other’s stories and perspectives, they developed

empathy and deepened their listening skills. This enabled them to have meaningful, even challenging, conversations and address problems more skillfully as the year went on.

In the academic classroom, where Molly’s students often work in small groups, these skills served students well. Molly watched as her students grew into the independent learners she was building them up to be.

In their weekly circles, students learned about identity and culture by talking about their families. They came to understand that every family is unique, and learned not to make assumptions.

As trust grew, a student whose family had recently immigrated finally decided to tell Molly her actual name. It turned out that when her family (who spoke limited English) had first moved to the district, the student’s name had been entered incorrectly in the school’s records – and everyone had been using the wrong name ever since. Molly felt awful. To support her student, and any who came after her, Molly made sure to correct the name whenever she could. (Molly stands up for her students, just as she encourages them to stand up for each other.)

As the now correctly named student felt increasingly comfortable in class, she “found” her voice. During a circle share on how things are done differently in different homes, she opened up about her family’s cultural practices. She helped other students expand their cultural horizons, and they helped her feel welcome in their midst.

### **5. Putting Empathy & Skills into Practice**

Toward the end of the school year, in the run-up to Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, Molly discussed different family compositions with her students. “This is the reality of families,” she explained.

For Father’s Day, Molly invited her students to write a letter to a man (not necessarily their father) who they looked up to.

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*Photo above: Teacher Molly Heekin.*

# Carrying on Emma's Legacy – with her Art

We are excited to announce the Emma Iris González Art Fund.

For almost all of Morningside Center's 40+ years of existence, Emma González helped to invent and drive the work of this organization. Over decades, she brought her endless creativity and driving passion for justice and joy into classrooms, schools, and our own organizational culture. Emma passed away in 2021.

Art surrounded Emma wherever she went – it was incorporated into her work with young people, it was in the clothes she wore, it filled her apartment. Emma herself was a gifted painter. As Mariana Gaston observes, "Emma was a Puerto Rican woman who embodied and channeled her Taino roots. She followed her spiritual insights into her life, her deep respect for young people, and into her art."

When Emma died, she left behind a rich trove of her artwork (including the piece pictured here). Emma's family and friends decided that one way to carry on her legacy would be to dedicate proceeds from the sale of her art to support the Morningside work that Emma was so passionate about.

We have now launched the Emma Iris González Arts Fund. All proceeds from the sale of Emma's

art will go toward this fund, which will provide small grants to schools to incorporate practices Emma championed, including peer mentoring, student leadership, and projects to advance racial and gender equity.

All of us at Morningside Center are honored to have known Emma and we are grateful to carry on her spirit and her work through the Arts Fund.



## *Cassie's Message continued from page 2*

and their teams, meeting with social workers, running after-school programs, leading parent and caregiver workshops, and supporting the voice and leadership of young people. With every group, no matter the age, we use the same practices – ones that invite listening, connection, deep and sometimes challenging conversations across differences – all enactments of real-time examples of the world we wish to inhabit.

We are struck by the power of this work to bring nourishing support and healing to adults and the young people in their care. We wish

that these practices were adopted by schools, organizations, and gathering places across the country. See Marieke van Woerkom's article on page 3 for more about what it means to really listen to our students.

At this difficult moment, my hope is that we adults can begin by finding ways to listen deeply to what young people have to say, to engage in cross-generational truth-telling. When we do, I suspect that we will begin to hear and see our path to hope – and find a roadmap to justice and liberation.

–Cassie Schwerner ♦



# Infusing SEL into After-School, with Marisol

Marisol Mendez's first job at Morningside's PAZ after-school program at PS 24 in Brooklyn was back when she was a first-year college student, at age 18. That was seventeen years ago, and she has been connected to PAZ, in one way or another, ever since.

Today, Marisol directs the PAZ Program, which serves 163 K-5 students in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. PAZ was founded in 1999 as a partnership between Morningside and PS 24 leaders who had a vision that this brand new dual language school would be infused with social and emotional learning (SEL) and equity – including in the after-school hours. The program was named by PAZ students – it means Peace from A to Z.

Marisol's own mother, known as Miss Mendez (pictured to the right), was a teacher at the school who helped to make PS 24 a national model for SEL infusion. Miss Mendez was an



expert teacher of The 4Rs, (Reading, Writing, Respect & Resolution, Morningside's preK-5 SEL curriculum) – and she enriched it along the way.

"She was very involved in the ideas behind The 4Rs," says Marisol, "and in the conflict resolution style that we are still helping kids to pick up and practice."

In short, says Marisol, "Social and emotional learning was baked into the bones of the school. And it's the way I learned to do SEL."

Now Marisol and her PAZ team are infusing SEL into the after-school program in a dynamic and evolving way. The program moves to meet the shifting interests of students, counselors, and families – incorporating everything from STEM and science fiction to coding and cooperative sports.

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*Photos above: Marisol Mendez and her mother, Miss Mendez; two PAZ students drumming.*



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With Marisol as its director, PAZ has taken on ambitious program-wide projects, and invited students' creativity in every way imaginable. Marisol is excited, for example, about a recent project that had students explore how music is used as a form of communication and a way to express cultural identity. Students also explored the connection between music and feelings by making paintings to express how different pieces of music make them feel.

"I would say that PAZ is not just doing enrichment activities," Marisol says. "It's trying – through the arts, through music, through science – to build our students' understanding of the way they relate to each other, the way that they handle conflict – really teaching them the social and emotional skills that they need as they grow up and in life."

Within its structure, PAZ makes room for SEL and mindfulness every day. The PAZ day begins and ends with a circle. In circle, students have a chance to check in on how they are doing and share their feelings about the activities they've done. Counselors (who work with small groups of students each day) receive plenty of training and support in incorporating SEL and equitable approaches into their work with young people.

PAZ also gives students lots of ways to get engaged in the school community. Because, says Marisol, "They naturally want to help. They want to volunteer. Our fifth graders are so eager to go work with the young students. They LOVE going to kindergarten! They want to be part of something. All you need to do is give them the opportunity for it, and they jump at it." ♦



## Thank you, Board of Directors!

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# New Fund Supports Our Staff Developers – and Morningside’s Future

We are excited to announce the launch of the Charles Lawrence Keith & Clara Miller Foundation Training and Support Fund. The fund will ensure the quality and power of Morningside Center’s work for years to come by supporting the people who deliver our programs in schools: our staff developers.

Morningside’s impact on educators, students, and families across New York City and beyond depends on the amazing team of 30+ staff developers who bring our work into schools. They bring with them their own special gifts – their energy, wisdom, creativity, and humor. They share their hearts and souls.

The cost of training, coaching, and supporting our staff developer team isn’t covered by our contracts with schools and districts.

The Charles Lawrence Keith & Clara Miller Foundation has stepped up to fill that gap.

Over the past 15 years, the foundation has supported some of Morningside’s deepest work, including the innovative projects of Emma González and the development and deepening of our racial equity work. The foundation is now in the process of sunseting (closing), and as a part of that process, in August 2023, it awarded Morningside Center a \$500,000 grant to establish the Charles Lawrence Keith & Clara Miller Foundation Training and Support Fund.

On September 19, 2023, we inaugurated the Fund with a day-long training of our staff developer team.

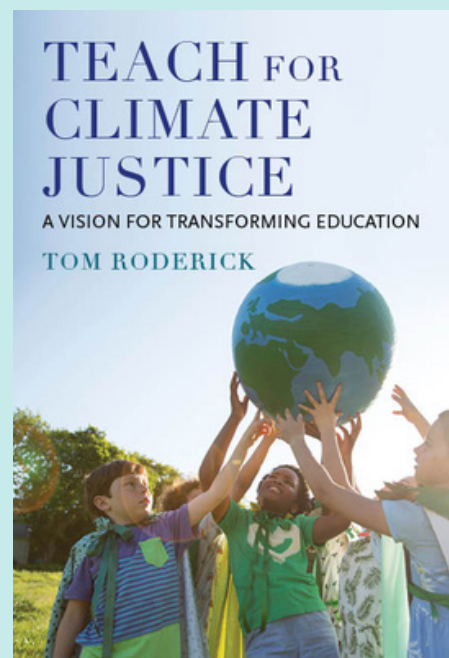
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## A New Book on Teaching for Climate Justice - by Tom Roderick!

Morningside Center's founding executive director, Tom Roderick, knew that social and emotional learning and an equity focus are key to our well-being in an era of climate crisis. So, drawing on his decades as a leader in the field of SEL and on the stories of inventive educators who are already showing the way, Tom wrote a book!

***Teach for Climate Justice: A Vision for Transforming Education*** was published this spring by Harvard Education Press. Educator and writer Pedro Noguero calls it “a timely and invaluable new book on the most important issue of our time.”

Tom has launched a new website to support educators who are teaching for climate justice. Visit it here! [www.teachforclimatejustice.org](http://www.teachforclimatejustice.org)







# Morningside's 2023 Accomplishments

**Extensive Support for NYC Educators.** Morningside Center delivered our 5-day training in social and emotional learning (SEL), restorative practices, and racial equity for **155 cohorts of NYC educators**, reaching thousands of educators and tens of thousands of students. We provided advanced training in restorative practices (Tier 2) for **27 cohorts of educators**. We supplied schools with **1,309 new curriculum kits**.

**The Keith & Miller Training and Support Fund.** We received a **\$500,000 grant** from the Charles Lawrence Keith and Clara Miller Foundation to ensure continuing professional development for our incredible team of 30 trainers/coaches. Visit our website to learn the amazing story of Charles Lawrence Keith, whose foundation is dedicated to "the preservation and defense of human rights and opposition to tyranny and oppression."

**Expanded Parent Work.** The NYC Department of Education asked Morningside to create new workshops for parents and caregivers. This year we developed **ten new parent workshops**, in both English and Spanish, on topics including building a caregiver community, self-care for families, conflict resolution, grief and loss, and the adolescent brain.

**SEL & Equity in After School.** Our work with after-school programs is spreading! Between January and July alone, we provided our 24-hour workshop series – and follow up on-site coaching – for staff from **14 NYC after-school programs**. We provide direct support for after-school staff in integrating community-building, SEL, and an equity focus into their programs.

**Generating New Resources.** We created and shared 35 new **lessons** on our TeachableMoment online resource center on everything from handling stress to working for climate justice.

**A Rich Harlem Partnership.** A highlight of our work this year has been our partnership with the Harlem Renaissance Education Pipeline and Community School District 5 to revitalize the educational landscape of the district by advancing culturally responsive and affirming SEL. This year our team has worked in almost all of the district's **23 schools** to rebuild trust, restore relationships, and build skills, working with administrators, crisis teams, social workers, caregivers, teachers, support staff, and students.

**Sharing the Learnings.** This year our team has presented at **conferences** including CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning), Change Philanthropy's Unity Summit, Community Schools and Family Engagement, the International Institute for Restorative Practices, and the National Afterschool Association.

**Your Record Generosity.** We raised a record-breaking \$119,000 from individual donors like **YOU** – and we hope to break that record again this year!

After some time to think about the assignment, one of her students, whose father is not part of her life, said she was going to write to her mother instead. Some students pushed back on this idea.

Molly invited her students to reflect on this, asking them to go beyond their own experience. Then she opened up a conversation.

Having been able to pause and tap into their empathy, some kids piped up with ideas about how to make sure that everyone had something to write about. In the end, they decided that students could write their letter to whoever they looked up to, whether a father or someone else. Every student felt included and cared for.

With time, and hard work, Molly made sure that all of the kids in her class felt that they belonged. They didn't have to leave parts of themselves at the door. They could show up fully and feel good about themselves even when life beyond school was hard.

Molly says she herself has learned a lot. For one thing, she says, "showing up with curiosity takes time and patience. It's the teacher voice and brain that you need to nurture. It really is a different way of communicating with children." But, she says, it "goes beyond being a teacher. It's about helping them navigate being a human."

—Marieke van Woerkom ♦

## New Fund, continued from page 10

All work made possible by the Fund is dedicated to the life and work of Charles Lawrence Keith.

### About Charles Lawrence Keith

Charles Lawrence Keith spent part of his childhood in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in NYC, where he met social worker Clara Miller, his lifelong companion. Keith went on to join

the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to fight fascism in Spain, and was taken prisoner by Franco's forces. He later served as a merchant seaman in World War II. Back home, he helped found the National Maritime Union and fought against anti-democratic unionists on the docks of New York.

He became a house painter in Greenwich Village and began buying and rehabilitating buildings, mostly residential. This is how he made his money, which he promptly invested in causes close to his heart. Keith was a feminist and one of the first investors in the Women's Bank of NY. He personally funded a neighborhood theater and was known for his generosity to the actors, artists, and social activists he encountered on his daily walks.

Shortly before his death in 1974, he founded the Charles Lawrence Keith & Clara Miller Foundation. Its stated goal: "the preservation and defense of human rights and opposition to tyranny and oppression."

We are honored to carry on the legacy of Charles Lawrence Keith. ♦







## Thank you, foundation friends!

Catherine and Joseph Aresty Foundation  
Charles Hayden Foundation  
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New York Community Trust  
Pinkerton Foundation  
Trinity Church Wall Street Philanthropies  
W.T. Grant Foundation  
Anonymous

... and thank you, individual donors!

## FY 2023 Operating Budget

### Revenue:

NYC Department of Education	\$1,792,603
After-School Programs	\$593,307
Other Contracts	\$483,470
Foundations & Corporations	\$950,697
Individual Donations	\$119,018
Learning Kits & Other Revenue	\$410,019

Total Revenue: \$4,349,114

### Expenses:

Personnel Services	\$4,416,378
Direct Program Expenses	\$422,424
General & Administrative OTPS	\$198,153
Total Expenses:	\$5,036,955

# Our Staff



Sara Carrero, Communications Specialist

Daniel Alexander-Coles, Senior Program Manager

Katrena Dennard, Director of Finance

Sully Diaz, Director of Program Operations

Dionne Grayman, Director of Strategic Partnerships

Lilith Hedrington, Payroll Specialist

Yaritza Hernandez, Contracts Manager

Kriston Huggins-Daniel, Data Processing Coordinator

Victoria Iglesias Nieves, Executive Assistant

Bryanna Kolja, Afterschool Supervisor/Program Coordinator

Jillian Luft, Curriculum Writer & Editor

Tala Manassah, Deputy Executive Director

Ann Mathews, HR Director

Marisol Mendez, PAZ Program Director



Laura McClure, Director of Fundraising

Edgardo Rivera, Senior Director of Operations and Finance

Demetria Robinson, Program and Operations Associate

Cassie Schwerner, Executive Director

Joseph Yabyabin, HR Assistant

Cecilia Xu, Staff Accountant





# Our Staff Developers

Eugenia Acuña  
Mamzelle Adolphine  
Lili Arkin  
Jonah Braverman  
Victoria Cheng-Gorini  
Ava Daniel  
Tresa Elguera  
Nelly Espina  
Amy Fabrikant  
Emily Feinstein  
Ellen Ferrin  
Rusa Ann Fischer  
Makeda Gershenson  
Adriana Guzmán-King  
Janice Marie Johnson  
Iris Laurencio  
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Beata Moon  
Lauren Neidhardt  
Angela Polite  
DaRon Ross  
Ava Schlesinger  
Jenny Seaquist  
Nicole Lavonne Smith-Johnson  
Pablo Torres  
Laurine Towler  
Marieke van Woerkom  
Nabil Viñas  
Elizabeth Miu-Lan Young  
Marisa Zalabak







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