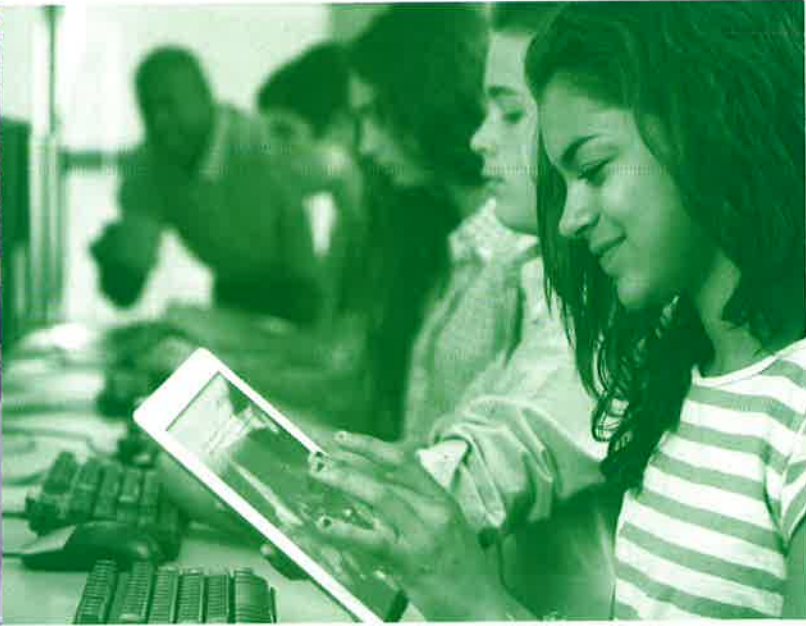
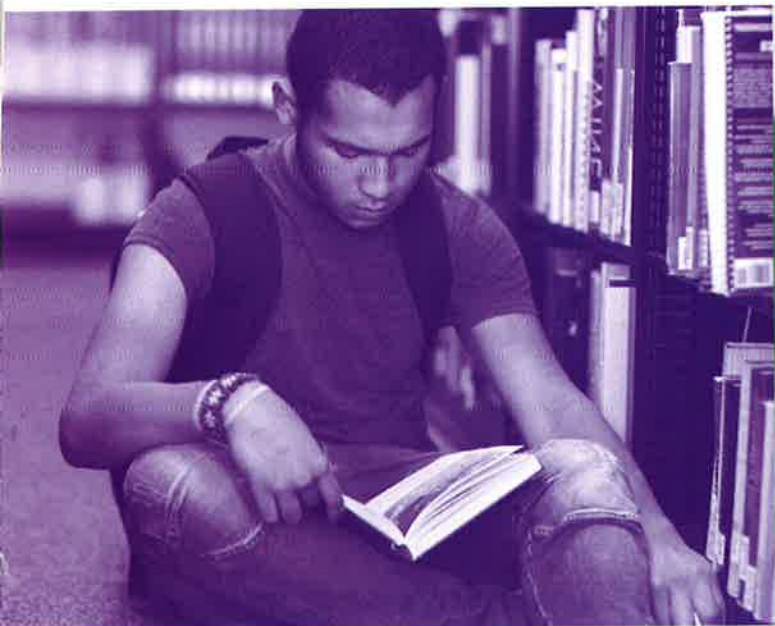




# THE KIDS STAY IN THE PICTURE

An ambitious project in East Palo Alto aims to create a kingdom of design and creativity where local youth will hold the keys.

STORY BY ROBIN HINDERY



**T**he groundbreaking of a 25,000-square-foot, amenity-laden, technologically advanced arts complex in underserved East Palo Alto would seem to be the occasion for much fanfare—perhaps a glitzy cocktail party or the unveiling of a gleaming donor wall.

Instead, it's likely you have no idea that construction of EPACENTER actually broke ground last October, or who is backing such an ambitious project. And that's by design.

The effort began to take shape nine years ago, when local philanthropists John and Marcia Goldman—whose giving has always followed the model of substance over flash—were looking to fund an initiative through their family foundation aimed at underserved youth in East Palo Alto, where the median household income is \$52,000 per year, compared to \$137,000 in neighboring Palo Alto. The couple stayed completely anonymous as the foundation's then-director and, later, a group of especially engaged local youths polled members of the community about a need that wasn't yet being met.

"For two years, we were faceless," Marcia recalls. "We didn't know what to expect. But we kept hearing, 'We want a place to make art, to dance, to make music.'"

"A place where they could express themselves," John adds. Despite the presence in recent years of hundreds of nonprofits in East Palo Alto—many of which focused on some aspect of the arts—there was no formal arts center at that time.

At the end of those exploratory years, the same energized youth presented their findings to the Goldmans, bringing the couple to tears, Marcia recalls. The desire was clear: a design and creativity center that would serve young people ages 12 - 25 through a range of programs in a safe learning environment where they could come together as a community.

"This is and always has been of, by, and for the youth," John stresses, noting that the advisory council of about a dozen teens and young adults was responsible for the name EPACENTER, the planned programming, the selection of the architect (the world-renowned Kulapat Yantrasast), and most other key early decisions. "They even demanded that the building be LEED Platinum certified," John recalls, "and when we asked them why that was important to them, they said, 'We want to be an example.'"

Nowhere in the capital campaign video or other public-facing documents do the Goldmans' names appear; even Executive Di-

rector Nadine Rambeau fulfills her role tirelessly but quietly. The tagline on the early EPACENTER promotional materials sums up the youth-focused nature of the project perfectly: "Your Culture, Your Power."

EPACENTER is slated to open in the summer of 2020, and will feature visual arts, dance and recording studios; practice rooms; a digital media lab; and a woodshop and maker space, in addition to exhibition and performance spaces such as a 350-seat outdoor amphitheater. Currently, just 17% of East Palo Alto students have art classes in school. In addition to instruction in the digital, visual, literary, and performance arts, EPACENTER will host events for all ages and provide access to an on-site youth mentoring center.

The complex and its many offerings will fill a gaping hole that many in the community had come to accept as permanent, believing that "anything good is for someone else," says Jules Thomas, a magnetic, en-

trepreneurial 16-year-old who has served on EPACENTER's advisory council and embraces the nickname "Old Man" in reference to his wise-beyond-his-years demeanor and a penchant for bow ties. After moving to East Palo Alto from San Jose when he was 10, Thomas recalled at the October 2018 groundbreaking ceremony, "I remember thinking to myself when I first got here, 'There is just so little here.' ... All the good things were so far away."

**"They will see a bright new way to succeed when they see this building live and in color," Thomas says of his peers. "We will come together as a community in a way that is both fundamental and exceptional."**



Rafael Soto-Ramos, Jennifer Mancía, Nadine Rambeau, Jennifer Lyons, Marcía and John Goldman, Jules Thomas, Melanie Resendiz, and Rene Alcaraz.



PHOTO: TRISHA LEEPER

At EPACENTER, the good things are moving within reach. “They will see a bright new way to succeed when they see this building live and in color,” Thomas says of his peers. “We will come together as a community in a way that is both fundamental and exceptional.”

For that to happen, however, the facility will need ongoing funding, and the Goldmans stress that while they provided the initial capital, the influx of additional investments is critical. In Silicon Valley parlance, the seed funding has been secured, and it’s time for a Series-A round.

To help build confidence in the model, EPACENTER’s core programming is already well underway, being held at off-site locations through partnerships with the Boys & Girls Clubs of the

Peninsula and other existing nonprofits. “We want it to be an active place when it opens,” John notes, and Marcía quickly adds: “This isn’t all about a building; it’s providing a center for something that’s already flourishing.”

The Goldmans have no doubt that the emotional return on investment with EPACENTER will exceed their wildest expectations; in fact, it seems it already has. “We never wanted to come in and say, ‘We know what you need,’” Marcía stresses. “We had to do this the right way, so we really took our time, and it’s been incredible.”

Ultimately, John says, it’s less about what kinds of classes or services a place like this offers; instead, it’s about providing fertile soil in a protected space. “All these young people need is opportunity,” he says. “The arts are just a vehicle for getting there.” ♦