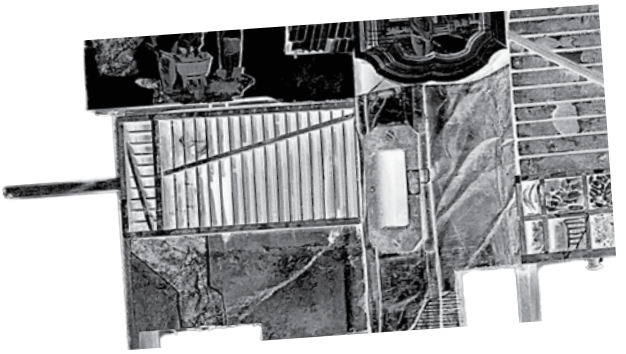
Chapter

6

"Even in the midst of the financial difficulties, Marygrove knew it wanted to preserve its legacy in Detroit, and it's a tremendous one. … It's why we wanted to be deeply engaged in creating a path for educational leadership in Detroit, particularly in serving underserved populations."

—Wendy Lewis Jackson, managing director, The Kresge Foundation Detroit Program[195]



Marygrove: A Garden of Learning, Community, and Creativity in Northwest Detroit

On a warm Tuesday morning in early September 2021, under a bright sky with patches of cloud, a venerable college campus on Detroit's northwest side admitted its first three-year-old.

In fact, close to 140 little students, from newborn to age five, started classes that day, the first to attend the new Marygrove Early Education Center, an exuberantly colorful modern nursery- and preschool adjoining the campus's stately Tudor Gothic main quad. The surrounding fifty-three acres, once home to the century-old Marygrove College, were by then transforming into a constellation of educational institutions, programs, and services that would shepherd Detroiters all the way from the womb to the workplace. The twenty-eight-thousand-square-foot Early Education Center was just one piece of a many-faceted vision on

the Marygrove campus for lifelong education and services for families, children, young adults, professionals-in-training, and the surrounding community.

Later that morning, three-year-old Ariyah Small, one of the Marygrove Early Education Center's first new enrollees, told her mother, "I love my new school." As the nonprofit educational news organization Chalkbeat Detroit reports it, Ariyah's mother, Antoinette Reid, asked, "What about it do you love?" The answer: "They got tiny bathrooms, and I can use it all by myself."[196]

Marygrove College, a Catholic institution that had been dedicated to educating adults since the beginning of the twentieth century, was not originally equipped with tiny bathrooms—or tiny anything, for that matter. The new nursery-school and prekindergarten building was a dramatic recent addition, tailored specifically to provide a nurturing, stimulating environment for very early learning—based on the principle that, as the nonprofit development firm IFF summarized it, "facility architecture impacts brain architecture."[197] It was a matter of particular pride for IFF, which developed the facility under contract with the nonprofit Marygrove Conservancy, that Ariyah Small's first excited comment was a statement about the building: it felt like it was made for her. And it was.

But the thoroughly new approach to early education that the Marygrove center embodies began long before a building was even under consideration. Its roots trace to a roundtable of Detroit-area foundations formed in 2010 to strengthen and expand preschool opportunities for lower-income families. The Southeast Michigan Early Childhood Funders Collaborative, initially convened by the Skillman Foundation and later cochaired by the Kresge and W. K. Kellogg foundations, was devoted mainly to backing community organizations that provided or advocated for early education. But in its first few years, the group found itself working in a near-vacuum of reliable data on the field and its needs. To help clarify the picture, The Kresge Foundation commissioned a report, published in 2015, that starkly documented the scarcity and fragility of local programs that offered licensed services and meaningful education for very young children.

The report showed that fewer than half of the Detroit children who needed childcare had any chance of attending a licensed program that would equip them to enter kindergarten ready to learn. Even among those lucky enough to find a program, fewer than half would have daylong service all year round, and an even smaller fraction of those would attend programs with high quality ratings. At the end, researchers put particular emphasis on improving the facilities where most early education takes place, many of which posed impediments to real learning, and hardly any of which were well suited to the needs of the youngest learners.[198]

That report, like the later Marygrove Early Education Center, was put together by IFF, a thirty-year-old community development financial institution that functions as a combination of development organization, think tank, consultancy, and social investor. IFF boasts a long résumé of projects that have enriched neighborhoods by, among other things, improving educational opportunities for their children. The Kresge Foundation had turned to IFF not only to research the field for the early childhood funders' group, but also to bolster Kresge's own plans to deepen its investments in Detroit neighborhoods by helping community leaders create more and better learning opportunities for families with young children. Kresge's theory, which IFF shared, was that neighborhoods where all children entered kindergarten prepared to learn and thrive would be both better places to live and stronger building blocks of a more just and equitable city.

The dispiriting condition of most of Detroit's childcare facilities led IFF to end its 2015 report with a bold proposition, which happened to track closely with Kresge's own ambitions: in order to upend the city's historically low standards for the places where early education takes place, philanthropy should set "an example to the entire Detroit community of the difference that a high-quality, blended-funded facility can make." Specifically, funders should create three new, exemplary early childhood centers around the city, weaving together many kinds of support for children and families, combining tuition income with public subsidies, and reflecting the best research on how physical surroundings can enrich children's learning, socialization, and well-being.[199]

Wendy Lewis Jackson, then in her seventh year at Kresge and serving as deputy director of its Detroit Program (she is now the program's managing director), viewed the "exemplar centers" idea as more than just a way of demonstrating the benefits of a good facility. Just as important, if they offered a learning program based on proven techniques, the centers would conclusively show the value to parents, neighborhoods, and the city of a first-rate educational program for the youngest Detroiters. In her view, creating the new centers would demonstrate that the root of children's success in later life, of their parents' confidence and happiness in their community, and of the stability and success of whole neighborhoods had everything to do with the likelihood that the children would learn and thrive from the moment they were born. "When I looked at the data," she said several years later, "it became very clear that the student achievement challenge in Detroit really began at birth. Kids were not entering kindergarten prepared, and it just compounded as they went on through their educational journey. So I remember being really compelled by that data."

To be truly exemplary, and to generate the greatest benefits for children and fami-

lies, the center would ideally be part of something much bigger. As Jackson and Kresge President Rip Rapson saw it, early education not only was crucial to the success of later schooling, but needed to be *integrated* into the whole "educational journey" that followed. It needed to be the first step in a continuous learning experience that carried on seamlessly through all the later grades and into adulthood. How that integration would work, where it would happen, who would oversee it, and how it could be engineered to greatest advantage were complicated questions with no clear answers. But simply creating a great preschool seemed like only one part—albeit a difficult and critical one—of a far greater challenge.

For Rapson, the first hint of how this kind of integration might work came from Omar Blaik, founder and CEO of U3 Advisors, an urban development consultancy that specializes in, among other things, linking educational institutions to their surrounding neighborhoods. Blaik, based in Philadelphia, had led the creation of that city's Penn Alexander School, a kindergarten-through-eighth-grade public school in which the University of Pennsylvania is intimately involved. In a late 2016 meeting with Rapson, Blaik had suggested Penn Alexander as one example of how a university could help design and implement innovative forms of education. He believed that a university, similarly engaged and committed, could help design and build a system in which early learning flows directly into the rest of a child's schooling.

Inspired partly by Blaik's suggestion, Foundation memos and discussions about early learning were soon describing the ideal preschool program as the beginning of a yearslong educational adventure, guided by experts from a university education department. The continuum was first conceived as "P–3" (i.e., continuing from pre-K through third grade), then P–12 and P–16 (through high school and college, respectively). Admittedly, there were hardly any examples of this kind of complete, smoothly coordinated educational conveyor belt in practice. But plenty of recent scholarship was already arguing for better "alignment" between early learning and K–12 education, and perhaps beyond.

But what the "alignment" would consist of, how long it should last, and how it would be achieved in the midst of Detroit's troubled and complex educational system were anything but clear. Nor was it clear whether any of the area's major universities would have the requisite interest, expertise, and resources to help create and sustain a fully aligned system—to craft principles of collaboration, set standards of teaching and continuity among grades, write curricula that would lead students seamlessly across multiple levels of schooling, and help integrate health and social services for children and families into the school-day experience. Even if a university were interested and

equipped for the role, how readily would frontline educators accept its guidance? And where could all the partners—the university; the nursery- and preschool providers; the elementary, middle, and high schools; and the health care and service professionals—be gathered and organized into a single, coherent endeavor?

Answers to any of these questions, if they existed at all, were vague and speculative at best. "All these ideas were swirling around," Rapson recalled half a dozen years later. "There were so many elements, so many possibilities, and we were trying to figure out which ones fit together and looked like what we wanted to achieve, and which ones didn't, and which ones maybe could be tweaked."

Meanwhile, dozens of other priorities consumed the Foundation's thinking and energy—especially in Detroit, a city that was then barely two years out of bankruptcy—and most of the items on Kresge's agenda were far more immediate and concrete than the largely hypothetical question of whether a foundation could forge an unbroken bond between early and later learning. For now, it seemed a big enough task just to build three exemplary pre-K centers in places where they would fuel neighborhood stability and vitality. The broader "alignment" issues would probably have to wait to be sorted out over time.

In these same years, Kresge had been broadening its focus in Detroit beyond downtown and Midtown, and turning it more and more toward the city's outlying neighborhoods, a process detailed in chapter 3. That meant looking for investment opportunities with fewer anchoring institutions than the ones that had fueled its earlier success in the urban center. The lack of major employers, large-scale investors, and concentrated population in these less-central communities would mean that neighborhood development strategies would have a less firm economic platform on which to build. Nor would public schools necessarily provide much of a basis for resurgence in these areas, at least at first. The Detroit Public Schools Community District, itself the byproduct of a decades-long financial collapse in public education, had been forced to close many neighborhood schools and was preoccupied with staffing and operating the remainder.

Here, then, is where the desire to create outstanding early childhood education centers merged with the need to cultivate sources of strength in residential areas of the city. If a neighborhood revitalization program could not be built on strong institutions and outstanding community schools, it could perhaps take a foothold in early childhood care and education—which, if successful, might well fuel improvements in later schooling, in residential stability, and, over time, in culture and commerce. If a neighborhood was an

attractive place for children to start their lives on a strong path to later success, more people might want to live and invest there. And those committed residents would be more likely to take an active interest in leading their neighborhood, their schools, and their city toward further improvement and growth. Or anyway, that was the prevailing theory at the time the IFF report on early education landed in Kresge's Midtown Detroit offices.

Blending the report's recommendations with its own strategic thinking, the Foundation launched a pair of related drives to design the three exemplary new early childhood centers and to link the improvement of preschool care and learning to the broader challenges of strengthening and stabilizing Detroit schools and neighborhoods. The first undertaking, called Kresge Early Years for Success: Detroit—"KEYS: Detroit," for short—drew together many of the region's foremost experts and practitioners in early education to define what an "exemplary" center would consist of and where up to three of them should be located.

The second, parallel line of work was a joint project with the Kellogg Foundation that canvassed thousands of city residents and community leaders to draw a blueprint for how, in parents' opinion, early education should intertwine with other public and civic initiatives to boost families' financial stability, health, ongoing education, and children's well-being. This consultative process, called Hope Starts Here: Detroit's Early Childhood Partnership, began in 2017, not long after KEYS: Detroit, and published its findings, with six strategies at their core, a year later. Kresge immediately backed the six strategies with a $25 million commitment, on top of an earlier $10 million already allocated to early education projects.

At the same time, in its push to expand Detroit's redevelopment deeper into its outlying areas, Kresge had taken a keen interest in a cluster of northwest neighborhoods anchored by Livernois Avenue and West McNichols (which locals know familiarly as Six Mile) Road. This area, which today is sometimes referred to by the shorthand Live6, had a storied history as the center of Detroit's Black middle class. It featured a promising mix of resident incomes, desirable housing, and significant areas of stable homeownership, alongside pockets of abandonment, poverty, and deferred maintenance that threatened wider harm if left unaddressed. Stirrings of new business activity dotted the major commercial arteries, interspersed with stretches of deteriorated or empty storefronts. Here, the Foundation hoped, would be an ideal place to test the theory that the availability of high-quality early education, combined with inherent resident assets and a strong neighborhood development program, could be an engine of neighborhood cohesion, opportunity, and optimism.

The Six Mile–Livernois area also had the benefit of two prominent institutions of higher learning that had remained committed to the city when others had fled. One of them, the University of Detroit Mercy, had recently joined with Kresge in founding a new organization called the Live6 Alliance, a nonprofit development group loosely modeled on one that had been key to Midtown's revitalization.

But the other institution, Marygrove College, was buckling under years of declining enrollments and mounting debt, and Kresge, along with a handful of other local funders, would soon be quietly working with the institution's board and executives to cobble together a rescue plan. By mid-2016, Rip Rapson was devoting an extraordinary share of his time and attention, and those of his top managers, to a search for alternative sources of financing and new operating models that might keep the college afloat. But as those efforts became more frantic, and the likelihood of success plunged closer and closer to zero, it seemed increasingly doubtful that the college could be one of the hoped-for anchors of redevelopment in northwest Detroit.

On the contrary: if Marygrove closed, it would quickly become an albatross—fifty-three acres of Gothic obsolescence, a vacant eyesore and a likely vortex of decay. As the college shuttered its undergraduate program in 2017 and carried on a yearlong losing battle to preserve its graduate school, Kresge's officers and board had little choice but to shift their energies. If preserving Marygrove's current operation failed, as it ultimately did, they would have to find some other productive use for the site before it fell into the clutches of the bankruptcy courts and architectural scavengers—and before it slipped beyond anyone's ability to forestall disaster.

Marygrove College had been founded by a Catholic religious order of women, known as the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, or IHM for short. The college had become independent early in the twenty-first century, but the Sisters retained considerable influence there and held a mortgage on the property. In keeping with the order's founding vision and approach to its ministry, Marygrove's educational philosophy had been built around Catholic social-action principles, and both the Sisters and the college's board and executives held a view of the college, and of education in general, as a means of equipping young people to pursue a more just and humane world. "We always looked at the college as a mission," Sister Jane Herb, a former president of the IHM congregation, said. "We saw it as serving the people of Detroit, and we wanted it to be an asset to the city and the community, something that made people's lives better." The Sisters were therefore adamant that, if the college were to close, the campus should be put to a use that would

honor its founding principles and contribute to social justice and community service. The prospect of it becoming an idle relic was therefore at least as horrifying to the IHM Sisters as it was to city officials, community leaders, and Kresge's staff.

So when the Foundation's top officers began considering what they could do to help keep the Marygrove campus from bankruptcy and dereliction, they had the full attention and support of the Sisters. Preserving the college, or at least some portion of it, was obviously the first hope of everyone involved, even if that meant—as it almost certainly would—some shrinkage and restructuring. When Marygrove's newly installed president, Elizabeth A. Burns, first contacted Kresge for help, in early 2016, she was still hoping for temporary help in restructuring the college's nearly $8 million in debt, reversing years of declining revenues and chronic operating deficits, and raising enough new donations to keep the whole institution afloat. But after an intense and increasingly desperate search for any feasible route to those goals, she and the college's board reluctantly concluded that the only possible survival strategy would be to close Marygrove's undergraduate program and continue solely with graduate and professional studies, operating in just one or two of its five historic buildings. That painful decision was announced in August 2017.

Even then, the college was relying on substantial operating grants from Kresge—as well as Foundation support for departing faculty and students—and its prospects for stanching the financial bleeding were never better than thin. By the time the next academic year had ended, the picture had only become grimmer, and the Marygrove board had little choice but to shutter the remainder of the programs and close the college at the end of the fall semester.

Heartbreaking as the loss of the college was to the students and faculty, the Sisters, and the Foundation, it nonetheless created what, in time, struck Wendy Lewis Jackson as a remarkable convergence of opportunities. As Kresge's point person for KEYS: Detroit and Hope Starts Here, Jackson was leading the search for places to create exemplary early childhood education centers—one of which, she strongly hoped, would be in the neighborhoods near the campus. Simultaneously, when she was assigned to be the Foundation's lead officer on the rescue of Marygrove, she was also confronting some prime real estate in the heart of those same neighborhoods. Even if the college were somehow able to soldier on at a smaller scale, a majority of its campus was about to need a major new use.

"I had an 'Aha!' moment," she said a few years later, "after one meeting of KEYS: Detroit. It was obvious to me that finding a parcel of land in Live6 for the kind of center

that the group was recommending was going to be a challenge. They were looking at one possible site that was *kind of* in Live6 but not really—it was adjacent to the neighborhood but not really in it. And I remember coming out of that meeting thinking, 'There is only one parcel *inside* that neighborhood that could accommodate what we want to build, and that is on that campus.'" She hadn't yet shared that idea with anyone, and most importantly not yet with the Sisters. But she felt reasonably sure that it would fit nicely with their values and sense of mission for the campus. So she made a note to pursue it with them, as well as with the group that was planning the new "exemplar centers" and with her Kresge colleagues. Here, she thought, we've got a project that needs land, and we've got land that needs a new purpose. "It seems kind of obvious now, in hindsight," she admitted. "But at the time, everything was happening at once, and fast, so it took me a little while to make the connection. But once I made it, I thought, 'Yeah. This is it.'"

At first blush, it might have seemed that one of the five existing Marygrove buildings could simply be repurposed for very young children. But that idea couldn't survive even a casual tour of the premises. For starters, everything was at adult scale (a member of the planning group for the new centers remembers taking one look at the urinals, mounted two feet above the floor, and thinking, "Nope"). But even beyond that, the stately, multistory buildings consisted almost entirely of formal classrooms and offices, the kind of somber layout that was obviously meant for scholars, not little children. More generally, the research that the KEYS: Detroit panel had been assembling prescribed dozens of important physical design features that work best for children's learning and socialization. The college buildings had almost none of them.

The campus did have a sizable parking lot, which would no longer be needed if hundreds of adult students with cars weren't attending college classes there. Given that the KEYS: Detroit goal was to build a new, purpose-designed center, the parking lot would be a beautifully accommodating spot. But in that case, what would become of the existing buildings? Part of the goal, after all, was to keep Marygrove from becoming empty and unused. With the college on the verge of closing, adding a new early childhood center would do almost nothing to prevent a massive vacancy. And even a shiny new preschool building might be less than appealing to parents if they'd have to drop their children in the middle of an otherwise derelict campus.

But then came a lucky coincidence. Elizabeth Moje, dean of the University of Michigan Marsal Family School of Education and a member of the KEYS: Detroit advisory panel, had separately been working on a project of her own, unrelated to early childhood

education—but it was a project that could possibly become a giant asset to the KEYS: Detroit initiative. She wanted to create what she called a "teaching school," a concept in which university graduates in education would complete their training and begin their careers as "residents" in a public school, in much the same way that newly minted medical doctors take residencies in teaching hospitals. The program would offer new teachers an opportunity to learn on the job, continue to be mentored by U-M professors, and ultimately be hired as permanent teachers somewhere in the Detroit school system.

At first, the implications for Marygrove hadn't occurred to Moje. She just wanted to explore the possibilities of an interesting educational partnership to improve teacher training. But she needed headquarters for it someplace in Detroit, and Marygrove seemed to have some vacant office and teaching space that would suit the program nicely. From that simple starting point, the concept she was developing was about to open a sweeping new vision for the campus and its surrounding neighborhood.

As Wendy Lewis Jackson remembered it, Moje called her in 2017 and asked for a meeting to describe her negotiations with the Detroit Public Schools Community District about the new residency program. At that point, her proposal had been focused on a single high school, which was coincidentally not far from Marygrove. But Moje thought it was possible that school officials might eventually be willing to expand the model so that the new teaching school could encompass the whole K–12 spectrum and also work in conjunction with an early childhood center. Together, the preschool and elementary, middle, and high schools would then form a continuous path for children from infancy all the way through secondary education—a model Moje had long considered close to ideal, and one she would soon learn was gaining traction at Kresge. If she could secure offices at Marygrove, close to the prospective teaching high school, she thought it might be good for her program and for the campus. Plus, as a member of the KEYS: Detroit group planning the exemplary new early learning centers, she was aware that one of the centers might very well be located on the same campus. So it, too, might become part of the university's vision for teacher training.

"Dean Moje said to me, 'I think there's a way to start to think about a much broader partnership than just an early childhood center,'" Jackson recalled. "She said, 'What if we thought about this as a cradle-to-career educational model?'" It was the same idea that Omar Blaik had proposed to Rip Rapson just a few months earlier: a child progresses from nursery school to preschool to kindergarten and on to the next twelve grades with teachers and principals in continual consultation. Plus, in Moje's vision, teachers would have top-notch training and professional development and would be coached and work-

ing together across grades. Other services might also be available on-site for the children and their families, starting as early as when parents were expecting. In the later years, the schools could offer programs and services that would prepare graduates for future work or postsecondary education. What she was describing was a concrete picture of how to achieve the P–12 "alignment" that Kresge had been contemplating in theory; here was an actual plan of action, with many of the vague or theoretical elements filled in.

Up to that point, Moje didn't yet know the details of Marygrove College's plight—its financial troubles were the subject of rumor, but the specifics weren't public—so her ideas hadn't involved any thoughts about repurposing the whole campus. She was just interested in some office space, close to the high school and the new early education center, and in the prospect of eventually creating a better way of nurturing children throughout their education, starting with the training of their teachers.

For Jackson, however, Moje's idea represented something much bigger. It was more like a General Solution to Everything, the complete rethinking and integration that all of Kresge's work at Marygrove, in education, and in the surrounding community needed. It could pave a route toward the "alignment" that had until now been only a general concept, by placing the university at the center of a multiparty educational network. It could, in a single initiative, honor the mission of the IHM Sisters, put the whole campus to use as a vibrant educational hub, complement the work of the Live6 Alliance, and, most important of all, offer Detroit children an exemplary learning path based on the newest and best educational principles.

Jackson's next step, within days, was a phone call to the newly hired superintendent of the Detroit Public Schools Community District, inviting him to the Kresge Detroit office to meet with her and Moje. The meeting left him intrigued—the idea touched on several goals in the new strategic plan he had just completed for the district—and he offered to assign a senior team to look into the possibilities. From there, the plan continued to progress and expand over the coming months and years.

The school district would soon embrace the entire model—establishing the teaching residency, committing to hire the teacher-residents as full-time employees, and conjuring a whole new K–12 School at Marygrove, incorporating new curricula jointly developed with the University of Michigan, built around a dual emphasis on engineering and social justice. In a unique arrangement for Detroit public schools, Marygrove would admit students by competitive examinations but also give admissions priority to graduates of the early childhood center and residents of the surrounding neighborhood.

The visionary new school came to life in two existing Marygrove structures. The

campus's centerpiece, its imposing neo-Gothic Liberal Arts Building, became the high school. After a rapid first-stage renovation, the first freshman class of 120 students started in September 2019, even as the remainder of the building was still being readied for higher grades. The next day, the front page of the *Detroit Free Press* declared it an "Elegant Place to Learn," displaying photos of the polished dark wood of the library, gleaming tiled hallways, a fully equipped theater, and views of Gothic grandeur through high, multipaned windows. Three years later, all four grades were studying in a thoroughly updated facility, including a sleek, bright cafeteria with light wood paneling accented with ceramic tile; a gym with a fully stocked weight room; elaborately equipped workspaces for advanced engineering projects (including 3D printers, among other high-tech features); college-quality science labs; and separate studio rooms for the various visual and performing arts. The first class of ninety-five seniors graduated from the School at Marygrove on May 31, 2023; eighty-seven of the students were from the inaugural freshman class from 2019.

Next door, as the high school renovations were underway, a prominent art deco property was simultaneously being repurposed for kindergarten through fifth grade. Marygrove College had acquired that building—originally the all-girls Immaculata High School in the 1940s and many years later Detroit Public Schools' Bates Academy—in 2010, hoping to create an on-campus community center. But the project never proved feasible, and Immaculata had consequently stood empty for close to a decade. Then, in the total redevelopment of Marygrove, it became a school again—now with ultramodern classrooms, arts studios, makerspaces for student projects, a gym and cafeteria, and a new library and media center in a converted chapel, all of which opened in 2022. The once-somber interiors became bright, airy spaces bathed in natural light and soft interior illumination, with colorful sound-absorbent baffles or decorative beams in many of the ceilings. At the same time, many original features, such as the historic terrazzo floors, were carefully preserved, repolished, and integrated into the new design.

In all, renovations on the Liberal Arts and Immaculata Buildings totaled close to $80 million. The money came not primarily from Kresge grants (though the Foundation provided tens of millions in loan guarantees, some of which will ultimately have to be paid out), but from a creative combination of private financing and federal development subsidies. The latter consisted mainly of New Markets Tax Credits and Historic Preservation Tax Incentives, complex federal programs that are designed to draw private investment into community redevelopment and historic preservation projects, respectively. The campus had recently been added to the National Register of Historic

Places, which qualified it for the historic tax credit subsidies but also demanded careful attention to the preservation of historic architectural features.

As classes started to open and the campus gradually returned to life, the University of Michigan became an increasingly visible presence, soon incorporating social, medical, dental, and mental health services from several of its professional schools, besides operating the teacher-residency program at Marygrove and developing customized curricula for every level of education there. It established a new bachelor's degree program called LEAPS—for Learning, Equity, and Problem-Solving for the Public Good—in which students spend their first year in residence at Marygrove. In the early 2020s, two of the university's prominent financial supporters made significant, eight-figure grants that will fund some of this work. Their enthusiasm shows promise of drawing yet more donors, wider public attention, and greater opportunity for university involvement on campus. In early 2023, U-M officially branded all this activity as a university initiative, conferring its name and logo on the various programs Moje was assembling on and around the campus. (Among other places, the official block-M monogram appeared on the first high school graduates' diplomas.)

Throughout these developments, Kresge provided massive amounts of financial support, eventually approaching $100 million in all, encompassing physical renovations, the blossoming educational programs, and the growing list of on-site services for children and families. It helped to organize a new institution, the Marygrove Conservancy, to which the ownership and management of the campus passed in early 2018. On the Conservancy board sit representatives of the Live6 Alliance, the Detroit Public Schools Community District, the University of Michigan, the IHM Sisters, the neighboring University of Detroit Mercy, and The Kresge Foundation. Its mission includes a blend of education, service provision, community development, and public-interest property management, all aimed at enriching the surrounding neighborhoods with a vibrant collection of educational, economic, and social activities on a revived and attractive campus.

With the decision to locate one of the new early learning centers at Marygrove came a closely related challenge: choosing an organization to operate the center. It would need to be an organization that could both deliver the outstanding education that KEYS: Detroit and others had envisioned and integrate with the other institutional partners at Marygrove. It would have to offer solid credentials in early learning and family services with an ability to work jointly with the university, the school district, the Conservancy, community leaders, and other tenants on campus to create a close-knit, collaborative

environment where every part would reinforce and enrich all the others.

One logical answer would be to find a big, nationally respected preschool provider with a strong balance sheet and experience in coordinating its work with university experts, public schools, or, in the best case, both. Members of a center advisory group had visited several distinguished early education centers around the country, including some run by outstanding operators with impressive résumés. But none of them was based in Detroit or even in Michigan. The advisory group believed that importing a provider from elsewhere would raise problems that could easily outweigh any advantage of size, wealth, or experience that a faraway operator might bring.

A prime reason for that concern was the mission of the new centers: to be an asset and a partner to the communities where they operated and to play a role in elevating early education citywide. A deep knowledge of Detroit, its strengths and difficulties, and its local culture and politics would be critical to making that mandate a reality. More generally, after decades of economic and political hardship, with platoons of outside experts periodically parachuting in with some big idea for "fixing" Detroit, locals had grown wary of imported answers to their problems. Although the city was far from rich in early childhood innovators, it had some homegrown talent on which to build. That was where Kresge and its partners preferred to start.

After considering a wide variety of options, both local and imported, the choice fell to Starfish Family Services, a fifty-year-old southeast Michigan nonprofit with a solid reputation for quality and with experience serving families that matched Detroit's demographics. The organization was known for weaving multiple different services and disciplines into a single, multifaceted program, which was a central feature of the KEYS: Detroit vision. Starfish had also won plaudits for developing an expertise in trauma care—sadly an all-too-necessary aspect of early education in very low-income communities—and incorporating that expertise into all its programs. Although its finances were not as strong or diversified as those of some of the field's national leaders, its respected staff, ability to earn the trust of parents and community leaders, and passion for quality set it apart from the majority of other operators.[200]

Next, Starfish, IFF, Kresge, and the other P–20 partners needed to finalize a design for the new center. The building would be based partly on principles that KEYS: Detroit had been gathering from its members' own experience and from their tour of programs in other cities. But alongside those national models, the partners needed guidance from the people who would be most important to the success of the early education program and of the whole campus: the parents who lived and raised children in the neighborhood.

"Revitalization on this campus must, and will, be accomplished with broad and deep engagement from community residents, civic organizations, and businesses," Kresge President Rip Rapson said in February 2018, in the Foundation's official announcement of the new plans for Marygrove. Accordingly, six months later IFF and Starfish began a series of community meetings, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews involving hundreds of residents, where participants could catalog their needs, concerns, aspirations, and images for an ideal center. These discussions were organized and led by the Detroit Collaborative Design Center, a longtime Kresge grantee specializing in responsive design, based at the University of Detroit Mercy.

The community consultations were wide-ranging and sometimes touchingly personal. For example, a father asked for plentiful natural light and fresh air so his son would experience the world as a bright and happy place, not a warehouse or an institution. A mother wanted space to be able to visit, observe, and meet with teachers periodically so she could be involved in her child's early learning as much as possible, even if her job allowed her to be there only occasionally. Several parents with busy work schedules expressed a need for full-day, full-year sessions so children would be able to keep learning all the time their parents were away and not be passed around to busy relatives or babysitters. The comments tracked closely with design principles rooted in scholarly research, and most of the requests are now visible in three dimensions throughout the Marygrove Early Education Center.

The center's design, by the nationally renowned architect Marlon Blackwell, features warm colors and gleefully irregular angles, along with a direct expression of many parents' wishes: light floods in from all sides through floor-to-ceiling windows and glass doorways, and children can look into or out of three inner courtyards. The expansive windows and imaginative use of space make indoor activities feel like outdoor ones, and vice versa. The result has a kind of magical effect exactly in keeping with Blackwell's intent: in the first days after the center opened, a delighted child told the center's principal, "When I'm inside, it's like I'm outside!"

Perhaps, to any normal observer, the effort to integrate early and later schooling, family services, university study, and neighborhood development would seem unremarkable, just an exercise in good sense, complicated but logically obvious. *Of course*, nursery- and preschool, public education, teacher training, career counseling, and health care and family services belong in the same place, where everyone in the surrounding community can draw support from all of it, and where every service

provider can benefit from everyone else's work. A child's life—actually, every human life—flows like a river across a whole landscape of experiences and obstacles and achievements. It is not a succession of puddles with barren land in between. To think of education as a ceaseless progression from infancy to the earliest years to preschool to K–12 and on and on corresponds to the normal lived reality (or at least the normal desire) of any parent, child, and adult.

But it is not the reality of America's educational, family-support, and employment systems. Each of those is constructed separately, regulated differently, paid for from different sources and by different authorities, obedient to its separate rules and folkways and professional hierarchies. For so many organizations, from so many different provinces of American social and educational life, to collaborate on a single campus, in pursuit of a single vision, would be, in the words of Hodding Carter III, former president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, nothing less than "an unnatural act."[201]

Creating the new educational multicampus at Marygrove demanded a feat of organizational engineering clever enough, and powerful enough, to overcome the centrifugal force of all those disparate systems and cultures and funding streams, pushing one another away like matching magnetic poles. The Marygrove Conservancy, KEYS: Detroit, and Hope Starts Here were all, in their slightly different ways, intended to conjure a gravitational force strong enough to hold the critical buttresses of a young life in creative alignment. And to make the task just one notch more challenging, at Marygrove they were all aiming to serve a cluster of neighborhoods in the surrounding area that had long been left adrift, where residents for decades had had to rely primarily on their own wits and will to ensure their children a fair chance in life. Delivering a complete and effective set of resources for these families and neighborhoods was the purpose, and the remarkable achievement, of the Marygrove transformation.

From that point, the difficulties ahead are harder to predict but may well be just as daunting. For starters, what if the project works *too well*? What if the early education center, the school, the advanced curriculum, the web of affiliated family and health services, the beauty of the renovated college buildings and grounds, all become such a magnet for new residents that longtime inhabitants begin to be pushed out? The danger of gentrification is never fully separable from programs of neighborhood improvement: the more a place "improves," the more outsiders—including people of greater means—will likely want to live there.

For now, there is plenty of room in the areas around Marygrove for more population and more investment without the risk of sweeping displacement. But by the time

the whole school is operational, a date that still might be close to a decade away, will the forces of growth have gradually become destabilizing? Everyone associated with the project, beginning with the school district, Kresge, and the University of Michigan, has expressed concern about the issue and a desire to monitor and respond to signs of trouble if they emerge. For now, though, the challenge is to deliver on the promises already made, to make the best use of the assets that Marygrove offers to the city and the neighborhood, and to ensure that local families, especially those living within a mile or two of the campus, remain the project's prime beneficiaries.

Another question hovering on Marygrove's horizon is how to sustain the extraordinary creative partnership among the disparate institutions that make up its governing core. In essence, the question is how much centripetal force will be needed, for how long, to keep the participants working around a common table with the high level of energy, flexibility, and mutual support that such a demanding project requires. For the last several years, the bulk of that binding force has come from The Kresge Foundation—not because the other partners weren't already dedicated to the idea and enthusiastic about making it real (without that prior dedication, nothing would have been possible), but because they are wholly dissimilar organizations not used to upsetting their normal ways of doing business for the sake of outsiders.

Kresge has met that challenge with both the obvious advantage of its checkbook and the subtler but equally powerful force of its supportive diplomacy. But the members of the P–20 Partnership (representing the Conservancy, Kresge, U-M, Starfish, and the school district) have also spent the formative years of this project building bonds of trust, opening paths of candid communication, and defining roles and expectations that serve all their missions. A formal joint operating agreement, signed in mid-2019, commits all the participants to a set of common responsibilities and procedures by which members hold one another accountable. Yet members emphasize, virtually unanimously, that it's their shared interest in success, much more than any formal agreement, that keeps them aligned.

"That's the beauty of it, really," one member of the P–20 Partnership said. "What really happens here isn't that everybody looks at the agreement and the operating plans and then we vote 'Yes, we'll do this,' and 'No, we won't do that.' What really happens here is that people who trust each other are working together in confidence, and communication is flowing, and people are fulfilling their commitments not because they signed something, but because they want to and they feel responsible to the other players. Because it's as important to them as it is to us. Because they're just as passionate

about the values and the mission as we are."[202] If that remains true, then the time may not be far when Kresge can step back—at least somewhat—from its role as an active participant and revert to that of a traditional funder.

A third task facing the Marygrove leaders and partners is filling out the remaining campus real estate with tenants and programs that complement the P–20 educational vision, contribute materially to the development of the surrounding community, and generate enough revenue to make the whole property economically sustainable. For the Early Education Center and the School at Marygrove, Starfish and the school district each pay $1 a year in rent and cover all their own operating expenses. That should eventually establish those buildings as break-even operations. But that still leaves the considerable cost of operating and maintaining the rest of the campus—nearly 50 percent of the property, including its expansive green space and common areas and the two other large (and as yet unrenovated) academic buildings, the Madame Cadillac and Florent Gillet Halls.

The current plan is for the University of Michigan to occupy a substantial space on campus for faculty and staff offices, meeting rooms, and class and dorm space for undergraduates in the LEAPS program. Some spaces, particularly in the picturesque Madame Cadillac building, are being rented out for meetings and celebrations, and with minor renovations, these could be expanded into a highly competitive, revenue-generating conference and events business. But those plans, by themselves, are unlikely to bring in enough revenue to solve the whole problem.

That is not as alarming as it sounds, given that Marygrove is a nonprofit institution serving the public interest, not a profit-seeking business. Some of its operations will probably always require—and deserve—a mix of philanthropic and government support. One advantage of having an inventory of partly unused space is that the Conservancy can seek additional funders who might support programs or community initiatives based in those buildings and, by extension, support the Conservancy and the campus as a whole. Plans for such initiatives include a community-based start-up incubator called the Powerhouse Entrepreneurial Center, which would provide business assistance services for aspiring Detroit entrepreneurs.

By nurturing new businesses, creative studios and workshops, and nonprofit start-ups, Powerhouse could draw economic opportunity into a neighborhood long deprived of it and help launch some businesses that might locate in vacant commercial property along the community's commercial corridors. It could cultivate a spirit of creative enterprise and invention on a campus where hundreds of young people will be watching

and learning and, perhaps, seeking internships or employment. Seeing all this activity coming together, donors interested in supporting economic justice, the arts, minority businesses, or entrepreneurship more broadly—or just in backing Detroiters with a dream and a plan—might well be enthusiastic about the Powerhouse vision. New donors attracted to the multifaceted work of the University of Michigan at Marygrove suggest that a well of other support is ready to be tapped.

To the knowledge of every expert involved in this project, the galaxy of different institutions and programs gathered at Marygrove is unique in the United States, and maybe in the world.

"The great surprise," Rapson said in a 2022 reflection on all that had been accomplished, "was that people actually could work their highly idiosyncratic agendas together to such a higher purpose. That's really remarkable when you think about it—when an independent early childhood provider can partner with a university can partner with a public school system can partner with a conservancy. I mean, all of the underlying complexity of operating agreements and joint use agreements and curriculum development agreements—this was really extraordinary. And it all depended on relationships among a few generous, nimble, intellectual people—relationships that, had they been turf-oriented, territorial, petty, arrogant, simply wouldn't have worked."

Meanwhile, in the streets and neighborhoods around Marygrove, further webs of cooperation and common effort are also forming. In its first half-dozen years of operation, the Live6 Alliance has put most of its efforts behind improving the commercial corridors, principally along West McNichols and Livernois, partly by helping entrepreneurs find space and start operations and by guiding existing businesses in applying for loans and other public support and in upgrading their facades. The alliance has worked with the city, including its Strategic Neighborhood Fund, to beautify the sidewalks, repair streets, clean up vacant lots, install crosswalks and bus stops, replace streetlights, and make other improvements that attract customers and improve public safety.

In 2016, Kresge joined with a roster of local banks, the state housing authority, and the Ford Foundation to create the Detroit Home Mortgage program, which offers mortgages for the purchase or renovation of undervalued properties. The Live6 Alliance and families around Marygrove have access to the program and have applied its resources to salvaging and preserving the neighborhood's housing stock.[203] At about the same time that Live6 and the Detroit Home Mortgage program were getting started, city hall announced that it was likewise training its focus on the Livernois-

McNichols community as part of Mayor Mike Duggan's commitment to bringing the resurgent energies of the city's center to more of its outlying neighborhoods. In 2017 the mayor unveiled the "Fitz Forward" initiative, matching a $4 million allocation from a national urban revitalization fund called Reimagining the Civic Commons, founded by Kresge and four other large foundations.

As of 2023, the results of these interconnected efforts have included a 2½-acre new park on parcels of barren city-owned land, plus a quarter-mile-long greenway curving across the neighborhood, between Marygrove and the University of Detroit Mercy, for walking and biking. Both were completed on time and have made a striking difference in the look and feel of the neighborhood. Many improvements to the streets and sidewalks, largely led by the Live6 Alliance and funded by the city and Kresge, were also completed punctually, and more are underway as this is written. Widespread housing renovations, a core objective of city hall and the participating foundations, have been slower to get started, though revised plans offer promise of greater progress to come.

The Live6 Alliance has a seat on the board of the Marygrove Conservancy and serves as a bridge between the transformation of the campus and that of the surrounding community. The organization also expects to draw more and more from the resources gathering at Marygrove, not least some programs of the University of Michigan that can be helpful to nearby businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs. But mostly, the interactions between Marygrove and Live6, in both directions, testify to the dependence of each one on the other. Marygrove's schools and programs depend on vibrant residential surroundings, full of families that want to entrust their children's education—all the way from birth to adulthood—to the institutions and programs assembled on the campus. And the neighborhood's future equally depends on cultivating and enriching the fifty-three-acre asset that, from 2017 to 2019, nearly went dark.

That resurrected campus now bustles with student life, from parents with infants in arms all the way to university scholars and professional trainees. The opening of the Marygrove Early Education Center in 2021 and, two years later, the graduation of the first senior class from the School at Marygrove have bookended the establishment of a lifelong educational asset unparalleled in Michigan or, indeed, virtually anywhere.

At a public forum in October 2022, Marygrove senior Dana Odums—who believes she was the first student to set foot in the school on its opening day in 2019—recalled how an early visit by Detroit schools Superintendent Nikolai Vitti focused her attention on Marygrove's vision and its core values, including equity, inclusion, problem-solving, and social justice. He encouraged students to embrace those values, she said, and to

champion them themselves. "That's what attracted me to Marygrove," Odums told the audience of educators, funders, parents, and community residents. "And now, I and my peers try to hold the underclassmen to those same core values."[204]

Artisan Kyles, a fellow senior and likewise one of the first students to enter Marygrove as a freshman, told the crowd that he looks forward to starting his own business one day and carrying his experience at Marygrove into the life of his business and his community. The school, he said, taught him essential disciplines and ideals that will equip him on that journey: "persevering, working hard, having integrity, being honest." From there, he added, "What I learned about engineering is all about problem-solving, working in our community and just making things better for the future."

"Thank you," he concluded, "to all the investors, for all the money and hope you poured into this school."[205]