

Get to Know Immerse Arkansas

04/10/2023

Immerse Arkansas was chosen as the 2023 Mitchell Williams Take Time To Give charity for the Central Arkansas market. We are excited to share the story of Immerse Arkansas and their work in this interview with Executive Director Eric Gilmore.

Describe the mission of Immerse Arkansas.

Immerse Arkansas is a nonprofit organization located in Little Rock, Arkansas that is working to build an expansive pathway to healing available to every youth from crisis in Arkansas. Founded in response to the harsh realities of youth aging out of foster care, Immerse supports youth ages 14-24, including youth in foster care, youth aging out of foster care, youth who have been adopted, homeless and runaway youth, and youth experiencing human trafficking and other forms of abuse. Youth who are referred to Immerse are often faced with a combination of challenges including poverty, homelessness, exposure to street violence or victimization, mental illness, unemployment, lack of education, and childhood trauma. We believe that when we surround youth with unconditional relationships, a vision for their restored future, and tools that anticipate their needs and dreams, we create a climate for healing, growth, and transformation.

Tell us about future plans or expansion plans for Immerse.

Over the next 5 years, Immerse will focus on building an expansive pathway to healing available to every youth from crisis in Arkansas. To do this, we are focused on 3 main tasks. First, we are strengthening our continuum of supports by providing trauma focused mental health care on-site, increasing our transformational experiences for youth from crisis, growing our LifeBASE programs to serve more youth, and much more. Second, we are building The Station, Arkansas' first shelter designed specifically for young adults ages 18-24. The Station will protect youth at their most vulnerable and give them a base to grow from. Finally, we are growing geographically to serve more youth around the state in their own communities. Immerse is on an ambitious path to launch 5 additional sites around Arkansas over the next 5 years. We will open our first additional site this year in Conway.

What challenges does Immerse face?

At Immerse, we believe that healthy, supportive relationships with caring adults are essential for a youth to begin healing from relational trauma. Instead of trying to manage, rescue, or fix youth in crisis, we serve them best through the gift of unconditional, supportive, and nurturing relationships, coupled with high expectations. It is the gift of belonging, the gift of being wanted and valued. One way we do this is by connecting each youth with at least one unpaid, caring adult through our mentoring program. Mentors offer on-going, supportive services to the youth on or off site, such as taking a youth to lunch, providing encouragement and a ride to a job interview, or attending the movies or sporting events together. However, recruiting enough mentors for the number of youth interested in a mentorship relationship has

proved to be a significant challenge. To help us with this challenge, Immerse is looking to hire a Mentor Coordinator to lead mentor recruitment, training and supporting efforts.

What is the most successful program Immerse offers and why?

Immerse Arkansas offers a continuum of youth programming, including a transitional program LifeBASE and a youth drop-in center, The OC (Overcomer Central). LifeBASE offers intensive support for a wide range of youth from crisis, including those who are in or aging out of foster care, have been adopted, or are experiencing homelessness and other traumas. LifeBASE equips youth with supportive, stable housing, individualized coaching, mentorship, life skills classes, and other tools as they transition into adulthood. Youth in LifeBASE live in Immerse group homes and apartments, or with foster and adoptive families.

Youth meet regularly with Immerse coaches to set and work toward goals, such as applying for jobs or working toward a high school or college diploma. Our LifeBASE program also includes LifeBASE Teen, which provides supports for teens (ages 14-18) in foster care or who have been adopted and their families, including individualized coaching and life skills training designed to address past trauma and prepare both teens and their families for the teen's transition into adulthood.

Youth across Immerse programming, including those in LifeBASE, have access to supports through our youth center, The OC. The OC is a safe, welcoming space where youth can access intensive case management, enjoy a healthy meal, take a shower, do laundry, attend life skills classes, utilize our computer lab and free wifi, participate in individual and group trauma therapy sessions, and build relationships with trained Immerse coaches, Immerse mentors, or other youth through regular activities and events. Last year, we provided supports to over 380 youth from crisis through our continuum of youth programs.

Give us an example of how you've seen the work of Immerse make a difference in the life of a youth.

One young man, Brody, began his journey towards overcoming through the OC Youth Center and then entered our LifeBASE Transitional Program where he began working, moved into his own apartment, and is pursuing independence. He shared, "They're showing me that there are people around me that care and that love me for me...I always felt like no one cared about me, no one loved me for me. I had to be someone else for everybody. God is putting people in place to guide me into a better future and get through my past." The deep impact of Immerse's LifeBASE program is evident in the lives of youth like Brody, who exited the LifeBASE program in 2022. Today, Brody dreams of expanding his own business, and continues to display the courage youth have to overcome barriers and accomplish big goals when they experience unconditional relationship and support from trusted individuals, like Immerse coaches, mentors, volunteers, and partners like Mitchell Williams Law Firm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-U5I-EasvQ>

Is there anything that you wish more people knew about your organization or the issues you are trying to solve?

The need for a trauma-informed youth shelter has consistently presented itself as one of the highest needs for young people connecting with Immerse Arkansas coaches and therapists. Last year, we saw over 100 youth who were in need of immediate shelter. Next month, Immerse will break ground on the Station, Arkansas's first emergency shelter dedicated to supporting youth ages 18-24. This 15-suite shelter will be built less than a quarter mile and within walking distance from our youth center, The OC. The proximity of these two service locations will allow youth to connect with Immerse's proven programs for youth from crisis, including access to The OC Youth Center supports.

We have initiated a fundraising campaign to raise awareness of The Station Youth Shelter and are looking for folks from the community to help support the work we are doing. Our goal is to reach 100 new monthly donors in the next couple of months which will activate a \$100,000 donation for Immerse from

an anonymous donor. Immerse is inviting the community to join us in doing whatever it takes to support youth from crisis when they are most vulnerable and integrate them to Immerses's proven youth programming. Those interested in doing whatever it takes to build the Station can find more information here <https://immersearkansas.org/whateverittakes#give>

What would make the greatest difference in helping your organization improve upon the mission?

The community is what makes the greatest difference in helping us improve upon our mission. Whether it's a local church or business serving a meal at the gathering, someone sharing their knowledge through a life skill class, being a mentor for a young adult, or supporting this work through monthly financial support; we cannot do this work without the help of others.

Immerse has an ongoing need for volunteers to mentor youth, help maintain youth homes and support spaces, prepare meals for youth, help host Immerse holiday or recreational events, and more. We need volunteers to offer their unique skills to help youth grow, learn new things, and prepare for adulthood. If an individual is interested in volunteering or mentoring at Immerse, please contact volunteer@immersearkansas.org or visit our website under the "Volunteer" tab in the top right hand corner to learn more about how to get involved.

If I wanted to get to know your organization better, what are the best ways to learn more?

For those interested in learning more about Immerse Arkansas, check out:

Website: www.immersearkansas.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/immersearkansas

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/immersearkansas/>

Youtube: www.youtube.com/immersearkansas

LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/immersearkansas

Schedule a Tour: www.immersearkansas.org/tourS