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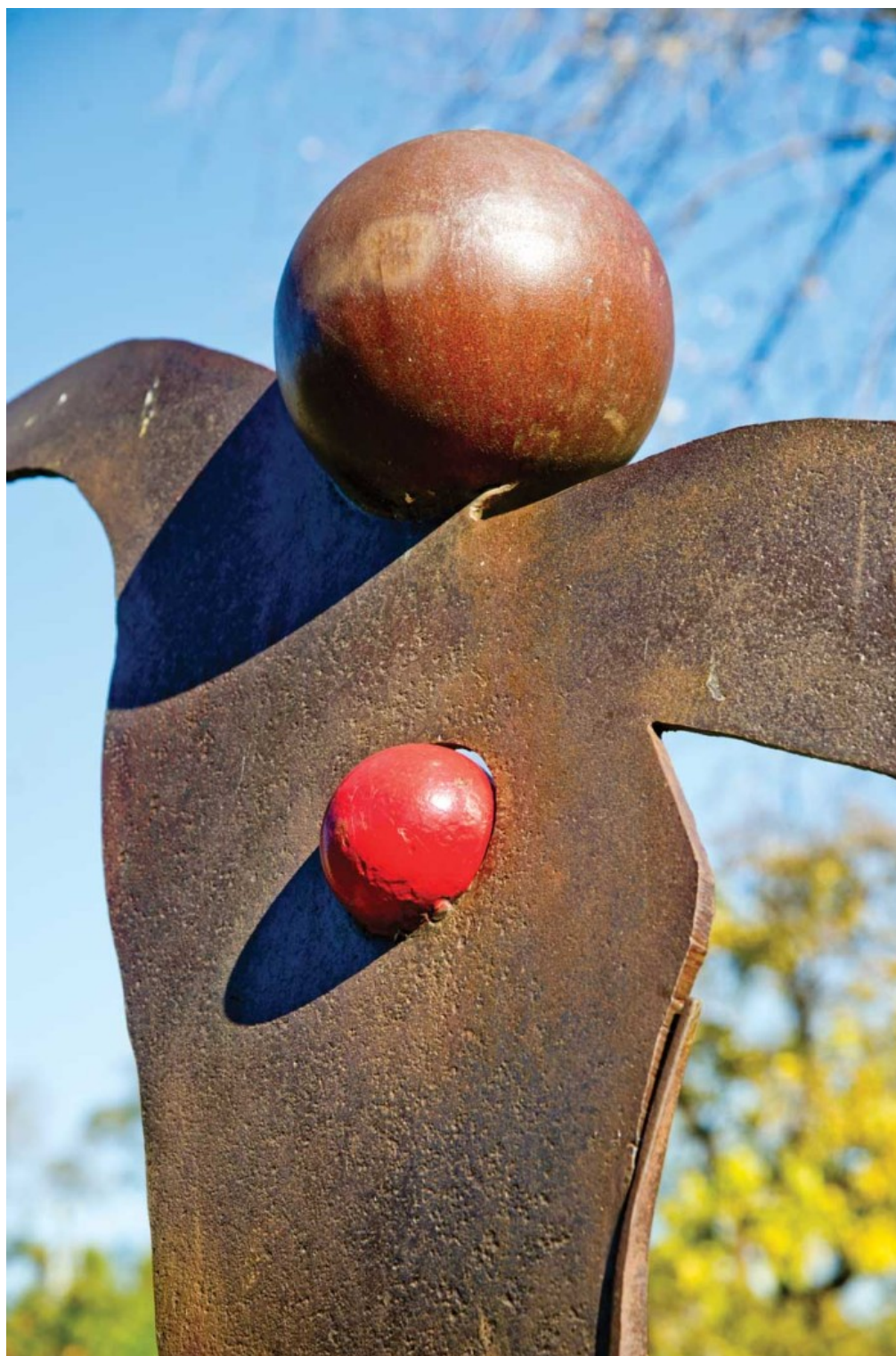
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**DETROIT** 3 MIN READ 1 DEC, 2015   
COMMENTS OFFON WOODBRIDGE – YOUTHWORKS DETROIT

## WOODBIDGE – YOUTHWORKS DETROIT



The blight scattered across the city and news stories' headlines are enough to awaken Michigan residents to poverty of Detroit, but Josh Rock, executive director of Woodbridge-based YouthWorks Detroit, aims to address a different poverty in the city through his service work. Many of the children and teenagers he meets in Detroit face relational poverty, the absence of committed relationships in their lives.

“Part of our desire is to build relationships with kids beyond a summer, one that will last for years,” Rock explains. “We want to build relationships with their family and be present in their life.” Rock himself has lived in Woodbridge for the last 14 years, eight of which he has spent with YouthWorks. Children from the Woodbridge neighborhood and the housing communities of Woodbridge Estates, Freedom Place, and Research Park join as young as second or third grade through Bezalel, an after-school and summer art program for elementary school- and middle school-aged children.

Following eighth grade, the youths have the opportunity to apply for Street Team, an intensive summer program in which youth receive training and payment to complete projects for organizations and individuals around the city. “We’ve worked for a lot of people,” Rock says, citing Southwest Solutions, Christian Development Corporation, the Woodbridge Company, and Charlotte Mason Community School as a few examples of patrons that have hired the team, which consists of 10 teenagers, for projects that can span from weeding parking lots and painting murals around the city to demolishing a basement or garage. After Street Team, the young participants are often eager to join the youth group, a faith-based, community-building program that has changed under Rock’s watch. He adheres to the nonprofit’s mission of “equipping youth for fullness of life” by focusing less on the number of adolescents in the youth group and more on the program’s ability to foster one-on-one relationships between the youths and staff members that attend their games and support them in their studies.

Through the relationships, YouthWorks seeks to provide opportunities for youth to embrace a full life, engage their Christian faith, and make good choices. Through its relationship-building model, the organization helps adolescents make it to college or graduate from high school to serve abroad in mission work for a year. Some of the youth have returned after college to help run the programs. “Not every kid makes good choices, but it’s good to stand with them as they makes choices,” Rock explains.

To his own work with YouthWorks Rock brings a powerful experience of running a three-day vacation Bible school in Highland Park when he first moved to the city.

“I didn’t have anything I could offer them except love,” he says about the youth he taught. YouthWorks has challenged him in similar ways. Even with demographic shifts in Woodbridge over the past decade, over 90% of program participants are African American youths from low-income, single-parent homes. Yet the relationships have remained significant. Rock remembers one youth who attended the Bezalel program, an eighth grader with a second grade reading level who was involved in fights at school nearly every other day. Today the youth is a high school graduate with his own business, a wife, and a child, thanks in part to Bezalel’s homework assistance and the youth group’s ability to inspire and support him. The example is one of many. “It’s been a powerful experience watching people’s lives change,” Rock says. “It’s been a powerful experience watching my life change.”

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