



STL Equity Matters

Welcome to the 27th edition of our newsletter: STL Equity Matters ...

How It Works: We shine a light on how race, ethnicity, religion, and gender are lived in our region.

Who Is Behind This: This newsletter is brought to you by the [River City Journalism Fund](#), a nonprofit journalism project formerly known as Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson. This rebranding and new collaboration bring additional resources and brainpower that will boost reporting on local government, the environment, criminal justice, the arts, the business community, and more.



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Let's dive in ...



Jayvionne Tucker, a University City High School sophomore, studying August Wilson's play, *Fences*. (Photo by Christian Gooden, St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

1. University City Schools Mark Gains Despite Pandemic

What's New: "The School District of University City is one of only a handful of local school districts that have grown since the start of the pandemic," writes Post-Dispatch education reporter Blythe Bernhard. "The high school alone added 87 students over last year's enrollment."

Why It Matters: For many years, the district struggled to maintain its reputation as a quality school system. But notably only two districts in St. Louis County, Bayless and University City, have surpassed their pre-pandemic enrollment by 1% or more, Bernhard reports.

Raising the Bar: Michael Peoples, University City High School principal, cited improvements in academics, behavior, and attendance and graduation rates as a draw to families. The school now offers the same number of AP courses, 13, as John Burroughs School, one of the region's top private prep academies.

Go Deeper: For a look at enrollment rates in other districts and in private and charter schools, read Bernhard's story in the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).



Elizabeth "Betty" Baumgartner is a sixth-grade teacher at Dorris Intermediate School in Collinsville, Ill.

2. Teacher Steps Up to Deal with Nazi Salute

What's New: When one of Betty Baumgartner's sixth-graders made a Nazi salute and a couple of friends did the same as they filed back

into her classroom last March, the educator refused to ignore it. That's why Baumgartner, though not Jewish, was honored as one of the region's [Unsung Heroes](#) this month by the St. Louis Jewish Light.

Why It Matters: As Baumgartner told the Jewish Light's Jordan Palmer: "I said, 'Guys, I think it's time that we know who Nazis are and you to understand this before we do some of the things we see on social media,'" she said.

The Lesson Plan: Baumgartner sought a video to help explain who the Nazis were and landed on a YouTube segment produced by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the story of [Irene Fogel Weiss](#).

"I am watching my students, and they had no real idea of the history," Baumgartner told Palmer. "They are sixth-graders, so I'd say they were consciously aware, but when a video tells them that these kids their own age were being separated from their parents and killed, they get that."

Follow-up: Baumgartner and her class later visited the St. Louis Kaplan Feldman Holocaust Museum. Their guide gave special attention to the stories of Jewish children.

Go Deeper: Read Palmer's account in the [St. Louis Jewish Light](#).



Jordan Robinson, 11, (in front),
Kennedie Boyd, 12, (back left), and
Nora Preciado, 9, take instruction
from Makos coach Terea Goodwin at
a team practice at the O'Fallon Park
Rec Complex in St. Louis. (Photo by
Laurie Skrivan, St. Louis Post-
Dispatch)

3. All-Black Swim Team Builds a New Narrative

What's New: The [Makos](#) are the Gateway Region YMCA's only all-Black swim team. The team formed a decade ago and is now competitive in national meets. Many team members are going on to college swimming careers. The team practices at the O'Fallon Park Rec Complex in North St. Louis.

Why It Matters: "The narrative is that African Americans don't swim," said Connie Johnson, who lives in North St. Louis and has her son, Joseph, 13, swimming with the Makos.

"The lack of diversity dates back generations. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, segregation — [and sometimes violence](#) — kept African Americans out of most public pools," reporter Colleen Schrappen noted in her story for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. "Even today, many remain racially separated by geography. Low-income families are frequently priced out, which is why Connie Johnson never swam when she was growing up in Chicago, the daughter of a single mom juggling two jobs."

Eyes on the Prizes: The Makos have battled their way from the bottom of the Y standings to consistent top-three finishes. The team joined USA Swimming this year, which has introduced the team to new events, pitted the swimmers against stronger competition, and taken them to different cities.

Go Deeper: Read Schrappen's story in the [Post-Dispatch](#).

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4. SSM Health Prescribes Food

What's New: SSM Health in partnership with the St. Louis Food Bank is sending home two days' worth of nutritious foods for qualifying patients, Michele Munz reports in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. The Bread Basket Program includes all seven of SSM Health's adult hospitals in St. Louis, St. Louis County, and St. Charles County.

Why It Matters: Increasingly, hospital systems are recognizing that social determinants of health like food insecurity weigh heavily on patients and their families. "Those factors are as impactful, if not more impactful, in someone's overall health and well-being than actual direct medical care," said Karen Bradshaw, SSM's director of community health for the St. Louis region.

By the Numbers:

- The U.S. has the highest health expenditures of any nation, with almost all the resources going to health-care services and less than 3% to public health and prevention. In that regard, the SSM program appears to be a step in the right direction.

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture [released a report last month](#) showing 44 million households, including 13 million children, experienced food insecurity in 2022, an increase of 31% overall and 44% for children from the previous year, and the highest rate since 2014.

Go Deeper: Read Munz's story in the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).



Darren McLemore Jr. (left) and Kristopher Nelson, co-founders of The Table STL, were among the entrepreneurs who won a grant from Food City.

5. Hail the Food-Equity Entrepreneurs

What's New: Food City hosted a glittering and tasty evening to celebrate its investment of \$436,000 in the St. Louis food economy. The nonprofit awarded 20 grants to local entrepreneurs involved in creating what it calls "an inclusive sustainable food ecosystem."



Amjed Abdeljabbar and his uncle have opened a new Palestinian restaurant in the City Foundry Food Hall. (Photo by Richard H. Weiss)

6. Palestinian Food Comes to City Foundry

What's New: Amjed Abdeljabbar and his his uncle Mahmoud Abed Abualizz have opened Mazaj, a new and fresh take on Palestinian fare in the City Foundry Food Hall.

Why It Matters: Food City began working in our region three years ago. As its website states:

"The project serves budding food entrepreneurs, industrious farmers, conscientious food policy and direct service organizers, educational institutions, social enterprises, and nonprofit initiatives with one thing in common: a relentless commitment to Food For All."

Who Is Behind This: The organization was launched by the Marson Family, former owners of [Nature's Bakery](#). After selling their company in 2020, the family committed to investing heavily in Nevada and St. Louis. It supports local entrepreneurs by providing machinery and workforce assistance. It also serves as an educational center for food science, facilitating learning for both children and adults.

Go Deeper: Learn more about [Food City](#).

Why It Matters: As little as a decade ago, St. Louis had not a single Palestinian restaurant. Since then, [Medina Mediterranean Grill](#) has opened three stores in the city of St. Louis, and Abdeljabbar and Abualizz opened [Golden Chicken](#) in St. Peters in 2020.

On the Menu: Here's the mouthwatering description from Cheryl Baehr in St. Louis Magazine:

"Mazaj's signature dish is its chicken shawarma, made from tender marinated meat that cooks on a vertical spit and is sliced and dressed to order. The restaurant also offers gyros, beef, chicken, and kufta (ground beef and lamb) kebabs, as well as falafel and loaded fries (with chicken shawarma meat, melted cheese, jalapeños, and garlic sauce)."

Go Deeper:

- Read Baehr's story in [St. Louis Magazine](#).
- Read Jessica Rogen's story in the [Riverfront Times](#).



Working with the River City Journalism Fund, Precious Barry provided a commentary about imposter syndrome for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

7. Imposter Syndrome Afflicts Best and Brightest

What's New: In a commentary for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Washington University freshman Precious Barry reflects on the challenges she faces coming from a disadvantaged background.

Why It Matters: As a senior at Riverview Gardens High School, Barry earned stellar marks while also stepping

up in civic spaces to advocate for people in marginalized communities. She was offered more than \$1 million in merit-based scholarship offers, including a full ride at Washington University. Even so, Barry wrote, she suffered from imposter syndrome:

"I began to think that my education and GPA, as shiny as it was, wouldn't nearly match other students'. How could I possibly succeed when other students came equipped with so many more sophisticated experiences both in the classroom and in their communities?"

Amplifying Voices: Barry's commentary was edited and sponsored by the River City Journalism Fund as part of its ongoing effort to amplify the voices of people from marginalized communities. Her piece, which was shared in print, online, and through social media, drew a strong reaction from readers.

Go Deeper: Read Barry's commentary in the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).

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