

Papitto Opportunity Connection

June 2025

Update On June 2025 Grant Cycle

Papitto Opportunity Connection's (POC) Board of Trustees and Board of Advisors are reviewing the more than 100 grant applications received for the Million Dollar Innovation Grant and Small Grant Programs from the June grant cycle, which closed on June 16.

POC anticipates making awards by early September, 2025. Again, as in the past, organizations will be notified by email of their award and there will be a two-week window for recipients to collect their funding.

To learn more about both grant programs, click [here](#).

Meet The 2025 Transform Rhode Island Scholarship Winners

For the fourth straight year, POC is listening and investing in young people in Rhode Island. Through the 2025 [Transform Rhode Island Scholarship \(TRIS\)](#), POC recently announced it is investing \$1 million in a Cranston student's inspiring idea aimed at improving the lives of those who need it most in the Ocean State.

Cranston High School West senior Melissa Gonzalez Gutierrez stood out among the 600 plus applicants as the winner of the 2025 Transform RI Scholarship. Melissa's winning idea — Little Libraries — promotes literacy and a brighter future for youth living in Rhode Island's underserved communities.

For her transformative idea, Melissa received a \$25,000 scholarship and will sit on the POC Advisory Board for the next year.



Pictured above: 2025 TRIS winner Melissa Gonzalez Gutierrez and POC Founder Barbara Papitto.

This year, POC awarded \$100,000 in TRIS scholarships to 10 high school students. Since TRIS was established in 2022, POC has invested more than \$4.6 million in this program. Overall, 36 RI high school students have received TRIS scholarships.



Pictured above: 2025 Transform RI Scholarship winners (Back row, L to R): Melissa Gonzalez Gutierrez, Cranston High School West; Haven Hoenick, La Salle Academy; Jace Goldstein, Moses Brown; Rocco DeMartino, Cumberland High School; Safiyatu Gassama, Blackstone Valley Prep; Suhani Srivastava, North Kingstown High School; Kendra Ramirez, Central Falls High School; Jessiret Peña Gomez, Central

High School; Nachiket Patel, Barrington High School; Quadratullah Omari, The Met High School. (Front row) John Tarantino, POC Managing Trustee, and POC Founder, Barbara Papitto.

To learn more about the 2025 Top 10 finalists, click [here](#).

Critical Work Culminates With Celebration In Woonsocket

The "Restoring The Village" closing party marked the culmination of Mariam Kaba's 2022 Transform Rhode Island Scholarship (TRIS) project in Woonsocket. Held as part of the Levitt AMP Woonsocket Music Series, the community celebration honored Mariam's powerful work that has made a significant impact throughout the community.



Pictured above: 2022 Transform RI Scholarship winner Mariam Kaba

The recent celebration featured music, storytelling, and connection, all reflecting the spirit of Mariam's project and its role in improving Woonsocket and those that work and reside in her community.

In the spirit of community support and Mariam's work to restore and uplift the Woonsocket community, attendees contributed food donations to benefit nonprofit organizations in the area including the Mariam Kaba Community Food Pantry at Harbour Youth Center.

FirstWorks Expands Summer Beats Free Concert Series

The [FirstWorks Summer Beats Concert Series](#) is back for a fifth straight year — with some exciting news for music lovers of all ages. The concert series will showcase everything from Grammy® nominated jazz headliners, to rising salsa talents, and celebrated folk musicians across various genres.

In addition to hosting three free concerts at Roger Williams Park, Summer Beats has expanded across Rhode Island and will celebrate Cape Verdean culture with the addition of a concert in Central Falls in August.

The FirstWorks Summer Beats Concert Series kicks off against the backdrop of the Roger Williams Park Bandstand on June 26 with [Las Guaracheras](#).



Pictured Above: Chachi Carvalho and Elida Almeida

The highlight of the summer series is a performance by four-time Grammy® nominee and composer, [William Cepeda](#), on July 11, followed by [Khumariyaan](#) on July 25.

This year, for the first time, FirstWorks has expanded the series to Central Falls and on August 9 it will host Cape Verdean singer-songwriter, [Elida Almeida](#) at [Jenks Park](#). She will be joined by Rhode Island's own celebrated hip hop artist and community advocate, Chachi Carvahlo.

For more information on these exciting shows, click [here](#).

Celebrating Juneteenth

POC is proud to celebrate and support Juneteenth, which commemorates the historic day — June 19, 1865— of the emancipation of enslaved people in the United States. The holiday was first celebrated in Texas, where on that date, in the aftermath of the Civil War, enslaved people were declared free under the terms of the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation.

On this day, we collectively celebrate African American liberation, accomplishments and contributions of education, effective communication, inner strength, and endurance.

Juneteenth is celebrated throughout the month in Rhode Island and it includes events and programs that educate individuals seeking to learn more about Black history while also focusing on uplifting and moving the African American community and the African diaspora at large, forward.



Images above courtesy of Justin Case

POC had the chance to hear from community members about what this significant day in history means to them:

“Juneteenth is a reminder that after the fight, good news and hope are on the way. It is both a celebration of Black resilience and a call for all of us to continue to fight and become storytellers of equity, justice, and true liberation for all.”

~ Weayonnoh Nelson Davies, [Economic Progress Institute](#)

“To me, Juneteenth represents freedom, a time of joy, remembrance, and unity, celebrated through cookouts, dancing, reflection, and community.”

~ Miriam Kaba, 2022 Transform RI Scholarship Winner

“The beauty of Juneteenth lies in its duality: it honors a painful history while making space for healing, reflection, and celebration.”

~ Helen Baskerville Dukes, RI organizer of the largest [Juneteenth celebration in Rhode Island](#).

“Juneteenth is more than a historical milestone - it is a call to action. It honors the resilience of the Black community and reminds us that the fight against systemic racism is far from over. We must continue pushing for equity, representation, and opportunity - not just in words, but in action.”

~ Lisa Ranglin, [RIBBA](#)

“Juneteenth is an opportunity for us to share the stories that highlight Black folks' ongoing fight for freedom.”

~ Valerie Tutson, [Rhode Island Black Storytellers](#)

Central Falls Foundation Honors POC Founder Barbara Papitto

The [Central Falls Foundation](#) recently honored Barbara Papitto with a special distinction, recognizing her as “someone whose support has brought lasting strength and new possibility to their mission.”

To date, POC has invested more than \$2 million in Central Falls to improve health outcomes and the lives of women and children. Barbara spoke about the importance of the critical work being done by Central Falls' Mayor, Maria Rivera, [Jenks Park Pediatrics'](#) Dr. Beata Nelken and [RI Housing](#) Executive Director Carol Ventura. Barbara also highlighted two Transform RI Scholarship recipients from Central Falls — Naomi Delgado Pedraza and Kendra Ramirez.



Image above courtesy of Cental Falls Foundation

“These young women are our future,” said Barbara. “They are seeing the example set by Carol Ventura, Dr. Nelken, and Mayor Rivera. We need more public servants like them and more women like them. Central Falls is a city on the rise. A city I’m proud to continue to invest in and support. Thank you to the Central Falls Foundation, this award truly is an honor.”

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