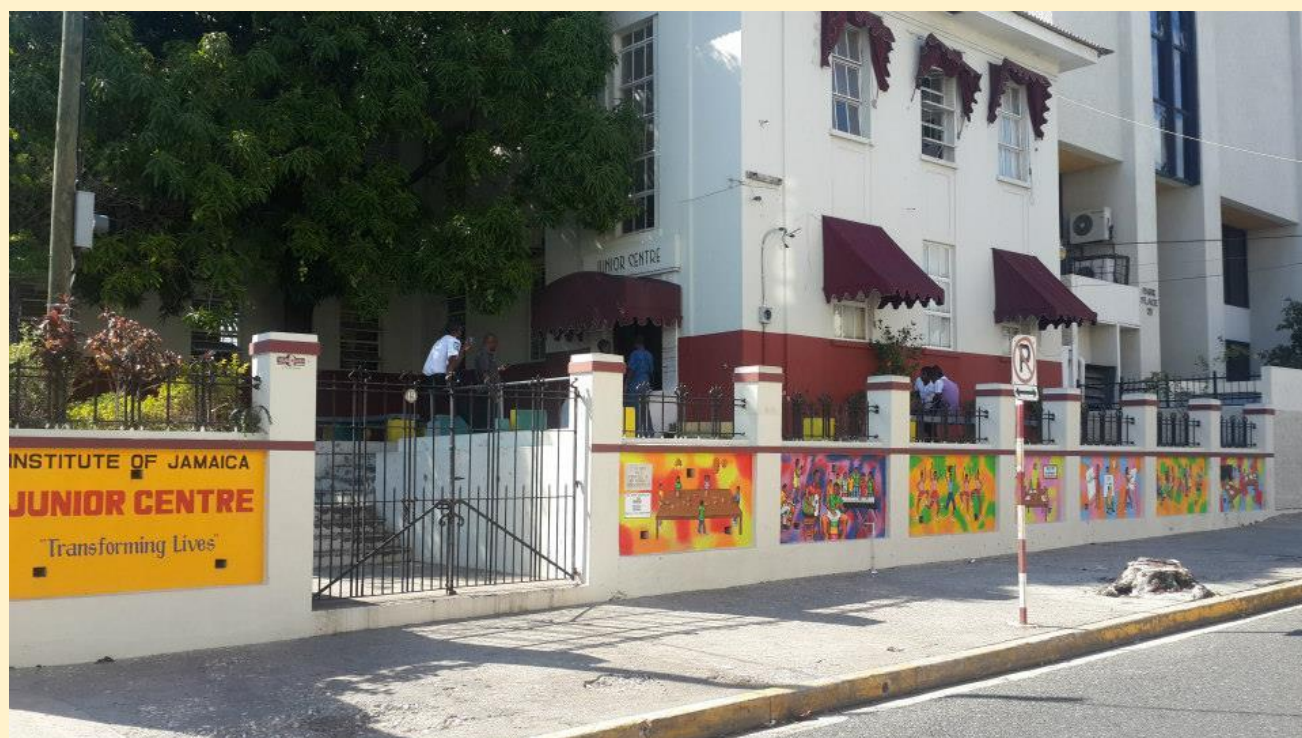




## *Eighty-Five Years of the Junior Centre: A Beacon of Youth Empowerment in Jamaica.*

Eighty-five years ago, in the heart of Downtown Kingston, a visionary institution was born one that would forever alter the landscape of youth development and cultural enrichment in Jamaica. The Junior Centre, established in 1940 (May 31<sup>st</sup>) by the Board of Governors at 19 East Street under the stewardship of Robert Verity, emerged as a pioneering force dedicated to nurturing the intellectual, artistic, and moral growth of Jamaica's children. As we celebrate its 85th anniversary, we reflect on a remarkable journey marked by resilience, innovation, and an unwavering commitment to the nation's youth.



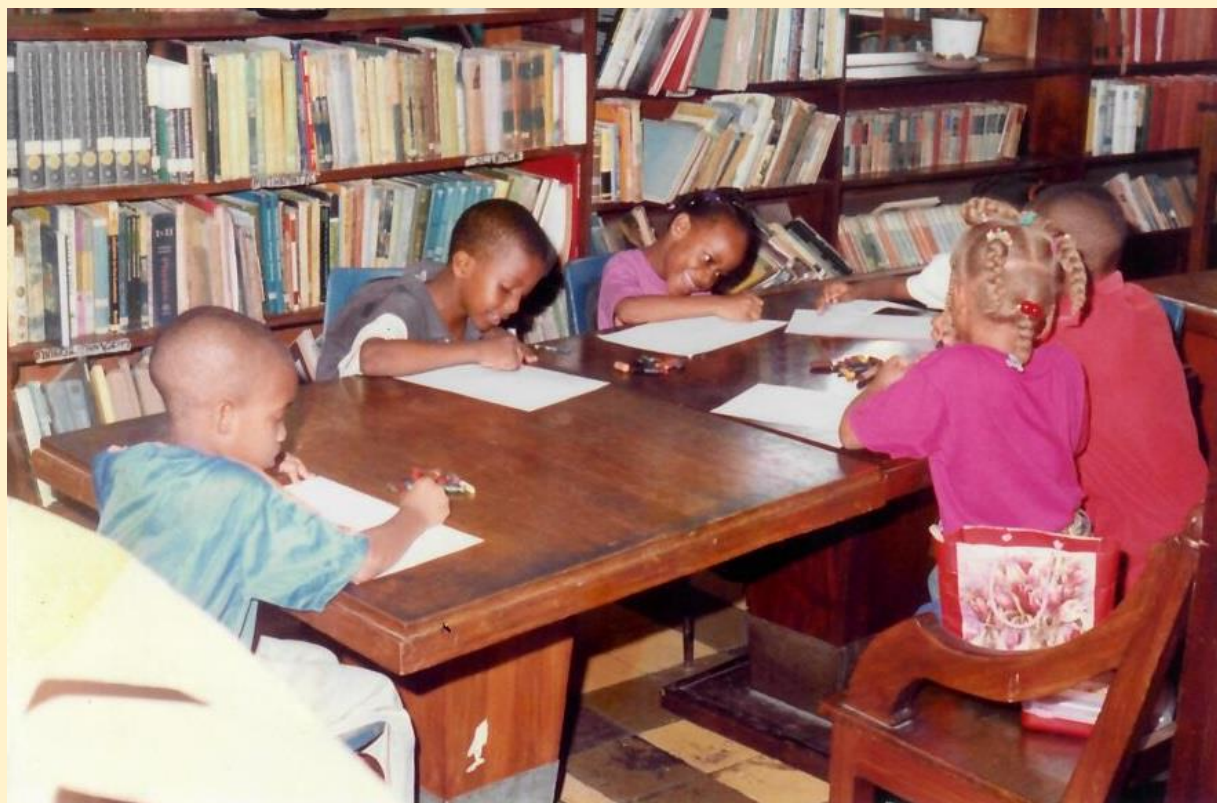
### **Founding Vision Amidst Adversity**

The conception of the Junior Centre was a response to the pressing need for structured cultural and educational opportunities for young Jamaicans. In 1939, the idea was welcomed by the Institute of Jamaica, yet financial constraints loomed large. The government pledged £500, and Jamaica Welfare Ltd. contributed £2,000 for construction and £800 for books and elementary school services. Additional support flowed from the Callaghan bequest (£1,000), Jamaica Welfare (£400), Jamaica Imperial Association (£200), Mr. E.R. Hanna (£200), West Indies Sugar Company (£100), Messrs Wray and Nephew (£100), Mr. Issa (£50), Mr. Eustace Myers (£30), and the public (£231). The Institute of Jamaica itself contributed £300, enabling the acquisition of land and the realization of a dream. On May 31, 1940, the Junior Centre was officially opened by Governor Sir Arthur Richards, with distinguished figures such as Mr. R.B. Barker, Mr. Norman Manley, Mr. Phillip Sherlock, and Robert Verity in attendance. Their speeches underscored the Centre's importance in a world on the brink of war, emphasizing Jamaica's duty to foster every avenue of progress for its youth.



Robert Verity

### **The First Lending Library and Cultural Hub**



*The East Street Junior Centre Library in the 90's*

The Junior Centre quickly distinguished itself as Jamaica's first lending library for children, predating the National Library by four decades. The library, meticulously curated with input from English librarians and classified by Messrs B Riley and Company, opened with 1,823 volumes spanning fairy tales, adventure, history, philosophy, music, visual arts, and science. Within the first 15 days, 1,000 children enrolled, and in just 21 days, 2,207 fiction and 591 non-fiction books were borrowed testament to the hunger for knowledge among Kingston's youth.

Membership was open to children aged 10-18 living and attending school in Kingston and St. Andrew. The overwhelming demand prompted the Board of Governors to authorize an immediate £100 for additional book purchases. The library's reading room, adorned with the finest Jamaican paintings and lino cuts, became a sanctuary of learning and inspiration.



### A Flourishing Centre for the Arts



*Dance class at the East Street Junior Centre in the 70's*

From its inception, the Junior Centre was more than a library; it was a crucible for artistic and cultural expression. Classes in art, drama, dance, and musical appreciation flourished under the guidance of luminaries such as Edna Manley, who not only taught drawing and painting but also designed the Centre's logo, infusing it with her belief that books possess "body and spirit." Esteemed artists, including Albert Huie (her teaching assistant), Ralph Campbell, David Pottinger, Corah Hamilton, and Lloyd Van-Pitterson, honed their talents within these walls.

The Centre's music workshop, led by Vidal Smith, engaged 750 children in three groups, each meeting weekly. The Junior Centre Music Workshop even had the honour of performing for Her Majesty during her visit to Jamaica. Creative clubs Art Hobby Group, Creative Drama, Creative Dancing, Whittling Club, and Toy Making Group offered diverse avenues for self-expression.

### Expansion, Outreach, and Enduring Partnerships

Recognizing the need to serve children beyond Downtown Kingston, the Centre expanded with a branch in Half Way Tree in 1941 (closed in 1985), Franklyn Town in 1985, and Greater Portmore in 1996. The Portmore Junior Centre, a gift from the Matalon family and built by West Indies Home Contractors (WIHCON), was dedicated to the memory of Moses Montifiore Matalon and situated at the Civic Centre complex. Classes began with a Summer Workshop Programme in July 1996, focusing on art and dance, with teachers provided by the MultiCare Foundation.



*The Half Way Tree Junior Centre*

The Centre's commitment to accessibility was further demonstrated through the "Junior Centre Magazine Programme," a weekly radio broadcast, and the innovative Rural Book Service, which delivered books to rural schools via rail. The Elementary School Library Service supplied 75

schools with sets of books, while donations from the Carnegie Foundation and Jamaica Welfare Ltd. enriched libraries across the island.

### **Trials, Triumphs, and Transformation**

The Junior Centre's journey has not been without challenges. The outbreak of World War II, resource rationing, and doubts about its location in a deprived area tested its resilience. Yet, the Centre thrived, welcoming children from all backgrounds and fostering an environment free from class prejudice.

The 1970s brought political unrest to Downtown Kingston, making Saturday classes impossible and leading to a decline in attendance. In 1979, the government ordered the Centre's closure, but public outcry and advocacy by Mrs. Verity and others led to its reopening after two weeks. The Outreach Programme, initiated in the 1970s and 1980s, sought to reengage the community and restore the Centre's vibrancy.

Throughout the decades, the Centre has weathered adversity with unwavering resolve. The tragic Kendall train crash of 1957 touched the lives of Thursday art class children, yet the spirit of the Centre endured.

### **Lasting Legacy and Contemporary Impact**

The legacy of the Junior Centre is etched into the lives of countless Jamaican children who have passed through its doors. Its programmes have evolved to include computer and internet access, homework support, school outreach, and participation in national competitions such as the Jamaica Cultural Development Commission (JCDC) festivals, where its young talents have won numerous medals.

Initiatives like the HUSH Children Symposium provide a platform for youth voices, while the annual Heroes for Children drive supports children in state care. The Centre continues to host the Art in School competition and Lunch Hour Concerts, maintaining its role as a vibrant hub of creativity and learning.



*East Street Junior Centre JCDC dancers*





*East Street Junior Centre JCDC dancers 2025 (Bronze medalists)*



*East Street Junior Centre Summer School 2023*



*East Street Junior Centre Summer School 2023*

### **Looking Forward: A Beacon for Future Generations**

As the Junior Centre marks its 85th anniversary, it stands as a beacon of hope and possibility. While the scale of its activities may have shifted, its foundational mission endures: to provide a nurturing space where Jamaican children can discover their potential, cultivate their talents, and



contribute meaningfully to society. The story of the Junior Centre is one of vision, perseverance, and the transformative power of community investment in youth. Its journey from a single idea in 1939 to a national institution is a testament to what can be achieved when a society invests in its children. As we celebrate this milestone, we honour not only the Centre's storied past but also its ongoing promise to Jamaica's future.

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