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**UW–Parkside, Racine County sustain partnership that supports care center**

Story by Abigail Becker, Senior Associate for Communications & Outreach, UniverCity Alliance, University of Wisconsin-Madison

A brightly colored mural hanging in the lobby of the new Jonathan Delagrave Youth Development & Care Center features a woman with a serene expression and open hands, water, and a bird flying toward sunlight. It evokes peace, tranquility, and hope.

It sends a message that the center, based in the Village of Caledonia in Racine County, and its staff aim to put the needs of the youth in its care first and provide evidence-based programs aimed at reducing recidivism, supporting mental and physical health, and fostering strong community ties.

“We have natural light throughout the whole facility. We have courtyards, we have windows in their rooms that get some sunlight. The new facility has courtyards in our day rooms, an outdoor recreational area, and an indoor gym,” said Superintendent Tony Chavez, describing the new facility that was celebrated at a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Feb. 5.

Some of the much-needed improvements were informed by University of Wisconsin–Parkside students enrolled in Dr. Aubri McDonald’s criminal justice course on race, crime, and law over the past four years. Since 2021, McDonald and Chavez have worked together in a partnership that began with [UniverCity Alliance](https://univercity.wisc.edu/) and was fostered in the following years by [UW-Parkside’s Community and Business Engagement Department](https://www.uwp.edu/connect/communityengagement/communityandbusinessengagement/).

In addition to informing the design of the new facility, which includes a garden area, music room, and cooking space, Chavez said the facility listened to the youth and made other changes like swapping out blankets that the youth said were too harsh on their hair. As the partnership evolved, McDonald and Chavez focused on surveying staff at the care center. This has resulted in a pay increase for staff, additional training, and a system to give anonymous feedback.

McDonald and Chavez share a commitment to caring for youth in the community and improving the juvenile justice system, which they said contributed to the duration of the ongoing, successful partnership. They received the [2025 Outstanding Partnership Award](https://www.uwp.edu/connect/communityengagement/communityandbusinessengagement/community-partnership-celebration.cfm) from UW-Parkside for their work and were recognized on April 11 at the [Community Partnership Celebration](https://www.uwp.edu/explore/news/2025cpc.cfm).

“Connecting, communication, and Tony's willingness to make time for the partnership and be flexible are the ingredients that keep the partnership going,” McDonald said.

“(McDonald) and UW-Parkside were always just willing to help the youth, demonstrated passion for the kids and youth corrections, and were sensitive to understanding that we're still running a 24/7 facility,” Chavez added.

**Partnership origins**

Chavez and McDonald were first connected in 2021 during a [partnership between Racine County and UniverCity Alliance](https://univercity.wisc.edu/racinecounty/#youth-justice) – a program based at the University of Wisconsin–Madison that connects Wisconsin local governments with university resources to address community-identified priorities.

During the partnership with UniverCity from 2020-23, Racine County was looking to understand best practices in juvenile justice surrounding the design, construction, hiring practices of detention workers and staff, as well as classroom and trauma-informed care practices to ensure its most vulnerable youth are placed in a facility with the design and foundation to foster long-term success upon returning to the community.

In addition to projects with McDonald and her students, Racine County also partnered with former UW-Parkside Clinical and Mental Health Counseling professor, Dr. Ann Friesema. The UniverCity partnership ultimately yielded nine projects completed by UW–Parkside and UW–Madison students, faculty, and instructors that included a review of the youth care facility operations manual, research about family engagement and youth re-entry, and recommendations for staff training.

At UW–Madison, Patti Coffey, Department of Psychology faculty associate; Julie Poehlmann, professor of Human Development and Family Studies and Dorothy A. O'Brien Chair in Human Ecology; and Lori DiPrete Brown, distinguished teaching faculty in Civil Society and Community Studies and director of Global Health and Human Ecology, facilitated these projects. DiPrete Brown is also a co-chair of the UniverCity Alliance Advisory Board.

“This partnership reflects what’s possible when the Universities of Wisconsin, as a collective of institutions, work together and listen to the needs of communities,” said Gavin Luter, who was managing director of UniverCity Alliance during the collaboration with Racine County and UW-Parkside.

Amy Garrigan, community engagement manager within UW–Parkside’s Community and Business Engagement Office said the structure that her office and programs like UniverCity provide are key to the success of community-university partnerships. Garrigan credited McDonald for continuing to build her class around projects with Chavez at the youth care facility. “The fact that this was happening right in their backyard and that you can make an impact on the way youth will experience criminal justice was something the students really took to heart,” Garrigan said.

For the students enrolled in McDonald’s class, the partnership provides professional development opportunities, fulfilling academic experiences, and the rare opportunity to gain access and insight into the operations of the care center. Sephontae Callier, a UW–Parkside senior graduating in May with a degree in criminal justice, said the experience gave him a new perspective on the juvenile justice system and influenced him to consider pursuing a career as a criminal justice lawyer. “It definitely gave me a more hands-on experience,” Callier said.