

A SUMMER OF CHANGE

At-risk teens show off what they learned in city program

By Olivia Bobrowsky
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To celebrate the end of a summer youth program, at-risk Baltimore teens came together Friday to show off their accomplishments. Boys juggled, girls balanced peacock feathers on their noses, a choir belted out original tunes and a young man read a poem aloud.

The eclectic performances at Heritage High School at Lake Clifton all demonstrated the themes behind the Baltimore Youth Apprenticeship Program, an opportunity for local youth to harness their energy to generate social change. The juggling and balancing act symbolized concentration, and the songs' lyrics and poem's verse spoke of determination.

After the live performances, the audience watched a documentary created by the teenagers showcasing the apprenticeship program experience. During the eight weeks, the more than 100 participants engaged in a wide range of activities, such as archery, meditation, horseback riding and silk-screening.

But for the main component of the program the participants split into two groups - Street Soldiers who learned how to prevent violence and Farm 2 Fork, which taught about environmental issues.

Street Soldiers used guest speakers and workshops to teach youths about risk factors that often lead to violence.

"We teach the students that violence is a disease, but we have a cure for that disease," said Lydia Hall, a facilitator for the program who's also in charge of discipline at Heritage High School. "We teach them how to defuse conflict."

Christin Pittman, a 16-year-old Street Soldier, said she's learned to avoid risk factors such as guns and alcohol. More importantly, she said, the program taught her how to communicate with other youths. Once school starts, the Street Soldiers will go into local middle schools to relay their lessons.

"It's a rippling effect," said Nzinga Oneferua-El, the founder and

executive director of Safe Healing Foundation, which founded the apprenticeship program with Baltimore City Recreation and Parks and Baltimore Safe and Sound Campaign. "We're looking to make major change in Baltimore."



Joshua Robinson, 16 (left), and Brandon Jones, 15, warm up before joining other juggling students on stage. (Baltimore Sun photo by Kim Hairston / August 14, 2009)

Tony Harper, a 19-year-old student at Doris M. Johnson High School, said the program has changed his outlook on life. He spent the summer working with Farm 2 Fork, during which participants planted and tended to crops on a 33-acre parcel in Catonsville.

The land, known as the Great Kids Farm, belongs to the Baltimore public school system, but Tony Geraci, the school system's director of food and nutrition, said that until recently it had been unused. The program participants were able to transform their lives as well as the land, he said.

"When I first came here, I had a lot of animosity," Harper said. "There were a lot of times when I had incidents with people or anger problems, and I would go to one of the staff members and they would talk to me and that would calm me down."

"It looks like for now, I'm going forward instead of backward. I'm making a positive change in what I'm doing, for real. I think this program is real; without it, I'd probably be in jail somewhere."

Now that the eight weeks are over, Oneferua-El is trying to help her students use their new attitudes to find jobs. The organization sponsored a career fair Friday, and a few teenagers have landed internships at local businesses.

"Hopefully, I'll leave here with a job," Harper said. "But I know I'll leave here with a positive mind."

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