

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Workshops aim to help young people improve their world

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"We all have dreams in this life."

"The hardest step is the first step."

"If you're gonna go about it, go 110 percent."

"I'm not afraid of anything but myself. ... It's all about how bad I want it. I will do whatever it takes to make it happen."

"Think about win, win, win."

"Sometimes you have to be your own leader, your own preacher, your own motivational speaker."

If you're Divine Bradley, you are certainly your own motivational speaker. And it didn't take long to realize the young people who sat enraptured in the lobby of the Seattle Children's Theatre Thursday were well on the way to finding their inner voices of inspiration.

About 100 of them -- ages 12 to 20, most looking as if they were in high school -- wore bright yellow "Dream It. Do it. Tour" T-shirts and gathered to brainstorm about problems in their communities and come up with solutions linked to their passions. From these workshops, they will organize into teams, develop action plans and try to apply for up to \$1,000 in seed money from Youth Venture and Starbucks. Adults serve strictly as mentors and technical advisers. This is the real "Kid Nation."

Starbucks has partnered with Virginia-based Youth Venture for the first time on these workshops and projects, granting \$38,000 and promoting the tour at Starbucks stores. There were no young people who came up with a "Save the Sonics" venture Thursday -- but if they came up with a solid enough plan, it might happen.

Some came in with other ideas, such as Luisa Ashenfelter and Cynthia Wanjiku, both 15 and sophomores at Franklin High School. They tossed out two. One: Put a group together so kids could express themselves through spoken word and then compile the best into a book they could sell. Two: Buy Christmas trees in bulk and sell them to raise money to renovate Union Gospel Mission.

The adults in the room believe young people have the power to change their world, and the sooner they start the sooner they're able to make a difference outside of it, too. "This is a call to action for all young people in Washington," said Tia Johnston, marketing manager for Youth Venture.

Young people come to these workshops to unleash their imaginations in small groups and talk about what's going on in their neighborhoods, at their schools. At the end of the two-hour workshop, the groups performed "commercials" -- skits -- to demonstrate their ideas.

When Bradley, 24, a social entrepreneur who changed his life at 17 when he proposed a Youth Venture that would take kids off the street in his neighborhood, Bedford-Stuyvesant, in Brooklyn, N.Y., he didn't know it would be the beginning of a new life with the group he created, Team Revolution.

He asked the young people in Seattle what some of their ideas were. Hands went up fast.

They wanted to counter homophobia. They wanted to create a hip-hop group so kids could express themselves, get things off their chests. They wanted a safe place to talk about religious tolerance.

Bradley used his own experiences to spur them on. He told them the one thing he was truly passionate about was to get kids off the street, by any means necessary. He loves movies, so he brought his TV out onto his porch and started screening programs. Kids started watching and they all started talking, dissecting the movies for their values and morals.

With Team Revolution, he has taken his dream of helping others and institutionalized it, traveling around the country to help young people dream big, and challenging them to fulfill those expectations. He told them he received \$500 when he applied to Youth Venture, but he and his friends turned that into a \$25,000 door-to-door fundraising campaign to build a space for neighborhood youths that incorporates a recording studio, and creating the performance group The Hip-Hop Project, and painting murals around the neighborhood.

When he talked to the students from Franklin High School, he encouraged them to dream big and follow through, emphasizing how hard they were going to have to work.

Marcel Howard's big dream: Make a Child Smile, or MACS. The 15-year-old sophomore wants to help provide school supplies and clothes to underprivileged children.

Other young people from the area had no shortage of ideas.

Elizabeth Wicks, 15, a sophomore at the International Community School, and her home-schooled friend Micaela Leavell, 15, met at a weeklong peace retreat in August organized by Catholic Relief Services. Their idea: to promote peace through a rally about the conflict in the Middle East and raise money to sponsor students' tuitions there.

Lisa Meersman, 17, of the Tacoma School of the Arts, is traveling to China, where she wants to establish a program between her school and a school there so students can experience each other's cultures and promote tolerance and peace.

Now it's time for ideas to turn into action.

As Youth Venture director of national partnerships Jim Hamel kept repeating throughout the event, "Giddyup."

MAKING CHANGE

To learn more about Youth Venture's "Dream It. Do It. Tour," visit GenV.net/en-us/starbucks.

- ❑ Action plan deadline: Nov. 1
- ❑ Selection panel review: Nov. 12

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