

Search bar

# Emboldened By Knowledge Of Self: Trailblazers Program Aims To Shift The Paradigm Of Intergenerational Leadership

Posted on May 8 2019 - 10:34am by Seattle Medium

« PREVIOUS | NEXT »



Theresa Hardy, standing, shares a proud moment with participants of the Trailblazers program. The program, a project of Hardy's non-profit – Inspirational Workshops, is housed at Washington Middle School. Photo/Asia Key-Armour.

By Asia Key-Armour  
The Seattle Medium

The door opens to a classroom at Washington Middle School, where inside 37 Black and Brown students prepare to participate in one-on-one mock interviews. During the session, the teens will take turns being the interviewer and interviewee for jobs like a registered nurse, therapist and communications specialist.

Thirteen-year-old Kamilo Jahn volunteers to go first. His voice is clear and strong. It commands the attention of the room, not in its volume or base, but with a certainty of self that is usually lacking among people his age.

These students are part of Inspirational Workshops' Trailblazers program. The first-year pilot program, founded by Theresa Hardy, Executive Director of Inspirational Workshops, which is integrated into the school day, has already shown great promise.

Hardy and Trailblazers coordinator Allani Seals sit perched at the front of the classroom as Jahn articulately answers his interview questions.

Hardy's values of dedication and loyalty inform the work she does, who she is as a professional and as a mother. She is unwavering in her commitment to see the program and its students thrive in an environment that challenges them to believe in themselves and each other.

"I have to be dedicated to this work," Hardy said. "I'm not gonna lie, it's a lot of work sometimes working with the students..... so I have to be dedicated to this work and the students. I have to also be dedicated to my daughter. I have to be dedicated to myself."

Seals, a freshman at University of Washington majoring in American Ethnic Studies, is passionate about achieving social justice and equity in education. She herself was once a student at Washington Middle School, and knows the difficulty that students can have without the visual representation of mentors, role models and peers that look like them.

At Washington, Seals was in the advanced placement program, which, according to the Seattle Public Schools website, is designed "for students demonstrating an exceptional ability or potential to learn and reason beyond their same-age classmates." She says the lack of representation she saw in her classes was unsettling, and illuminated the vision for her future.

"It's a predominately White and East Asian program," she said. "Even though the classes were more challenging, I didn't feel challenged culturally and I didn't see myself being represented that way.

"Now, I want to come into education and try to be the light that I didn't have when I was a kid," adds Seals.

According to Hardy, there are four pillars to the program: personal development, social justice, college and career exploration, and students having an opportunity to educate educators.

It's a leadership model that Hardy believes is missing in education and similar programs in the area. Working with youth organizations like the YWCA and Y Scholars equipped her with the confidence and skills to foster a new program that she knows the youth need.

The educational model she developed provides students and teachers with an opportunity to learn from one another, develop an understanding of culture and mutual respect for one another.

"Trailblazers is really about pioneers, the people to do it first," Hardy said. "I never saw youth actually providing professional development to their educators on implicit bias, on how to build healthy relationships with students of color from the student's perspective. So now educators are actually learning from their students."

Hardy notes the shift in demographics in the area has made leadership programs like Trailblazers a necessity.

"The dynamics at Washington [Middle School] have changed," she said. "There's a lot more White students here now, when it used to be a predominantly Black school and a Black community."

She said the program caters to students of color and helps to reassure and empower them in education.

"[For] a lot of Black and brown students, their experiences are becoming different," Hardy said. "They're seeing these White kids are in these types of classes. They're thinking, 'They're smarter than us.' They need a program like this that tells them you're really intelligent. You're smart, you're great, you're those messages all the time and to be in classes where other people [who look like them] are excelling."

Hardy's presence in the room is a comfort to the students, who love and respect her. Her red heels clink softly on the linoleum floor as she weaves through their desks, listening to the students ask and answer questions, as she offers advice. Her boisterous tone is encouraging in a way that motivates her students to do their best work.

According to Hardy, anyone can be an educator and everyone can learn. What she calls the paradigm shift is accepting that the youth can offer wisdom through their experience, which she believes is the best teacher.

"One of the things I really want to eliminate is people saying that youth are the leaders of our future," Hardy said. "It drives me crazy because they're really our leaders now, and that's what we need to cultivate. In society, in schools, in our homes as well, we don't look at our youth as leaders."

That's why one of her goals with this program is changing the perspective for students, so they can go from feeling hopeless to feeling powerful.

"In the Trailblazers program we call this the paradigm shift," says Hardy. "They start off as victims, then they become educated, then they become educators, and then they become victors."

Jahn said he is more knowledgeable about the community, his culture and the state of the world around him because of the Trailblazers program.

"I've learned a lot about my history and my ancestors, my culture," Jahn said. "I learned a lot about stereotypes and misrepresentation of people of color."

Through the program, the Trailblazers created a social justice movement called #UnfilteredTruth. In one video, Jahn talks about how his curriculum spreads misinformation about his culture. He used the example of West African Ruler Mansa Musa and his incomprehensible wealth.

Jahn says that his history textbooks described Musa as just one of the richest people to ever live, when in fact he remains the wealthiest man of all time. He saw this wording as an attempted erasure. Even at thirteen, he understands the vitality of learning one's true history.

"One of the most important things about today is knowing where you come from," said Jahn. "It's my history."

That's a sentiment Hardy wants all of her students to hold. When she was their age, she said she could have used a mentor like herself or Seals to tell her that she could strive for more than what she'd been given and that she could be great.

She uses James Baldwin's personal essay, "A Letter to My Nephew," to explain the conditions of her childhood and the trap of mediocrity so many disadvantaged youth fall into.

"You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were Black and for no other reason," Baldwin wrote. "The limits to your ambition were thus expected to be settled. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence. You were expected to make peace with mediocrity."

When she was a teenager, Hardy said she never dreamed big. Even now, she admits that her vision for the future is limited. She has to reassure herself often of how far she's come and how far she can go.

The path she has taken — being heavily involved in the street life at twelve, a high school dropout at seventeen, being homeless while pregnant and incarcerated — drives her desire to "create a better opportunity for youth than [she] had."

"All those experiences [helped] me to be the best that I can be in this position and in my career," Hardy said. "Specifically, working with youth, professionals and life-coaching."

Two months ago, Hardy took Jahn and a few of the other Trailblazers on a trip to Washington D.C., where they visited the African American History Museum and Howard University. According to the participants of the program, it is through opportunities and experiences like this that have already begun to change their perspective on life and their future.

"Before Trailblazers I didn't know whether I wanted to go to college or not," said Jahn. "But after Ms. Theresa taught me more about everything, about college and how you can get educated, I started to think I might as well do it. There's nothing to lose."

Share this story: Facebook Twitter LinkedIn Email

Seattle Medium

About the Author

