

youthrive hosts PeaceJam Slam at Capri Theater

Written by Ivan Phifer, Staff Writer
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“Violence is not new, but ingrained in American culture,” said Edwin Irwin, director of youth justice and community engagement of youthrive, while addressing 230 young people and advisors at the 2012 PeaceJam Slam.

Minneapolis’ oldest movie theater, The Capri Theater, 2027 West Broadway Ave., Minneapolis hosted the event which was organized by youthrive, a non-profit that builds cross-generational relationships. Irwin said youthrive is based on three ideas – education, inspiration and action.

“The overall goal is to break the cycle of violence and create the next generation of peace makers,” said Irwin.

The question Irwin posed for all at the conference was, “how do we create the next generation of peace makers and intentionally engage young people?”



Mike Hannah, who is responsible for the social media efforts at youthrive, is also a young local hip hop artist (Mike Dreams). Hannah led a workshop on creative expression to help young people learn to channel negative energy into positive energy through art, writing, music and poetry.

“We just gave them the tools to open up discussion and learn the importance of emotion. It not

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only helps therapeutically, but also helps others relate to what we speak about,” said Hannah.

Hannah said that during the workshop, he noticed some students were engaged and others were more on the quiet side. “Afterwards, a few of the participants who weren’t so quick to speak up told me the workshop helped them tap into feelings that they never had the opportunity to express,” said Hannah.



Other workshop topics included dismantling stereotypes, presented by 4H Urban Development; promoting healthy dating relationships and preventing sexual violence, presented by the youthrive Scholars Team; helping youth create personal peace journeys facilitated by Minneapolis Community and Technical College instructor Vera Snow and Project Happiness, led by the Minnesota Association for Children’s Mental Health.

“‘Project Happiness: The Documentary’ was shown at the conference to guide youth, adults and communities through examining what truly makes people happy,” said Callie J. Aguilar, associate director of youthrive. “We thought that was especially important for young people who get caught up in the pressures of consumer society.”

Irwin facilitated a discussion about the role media plays in perpetuating violence. In the discussion, the group uncovered some truths about negative messages through music videos and the gaming industry.

The discussion took place after showing a video clip of the Mary Johnson story.

Johnson is the founder of From Death to Life, an organization dedicated to ending violence

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through healing and reconciliation between families of victims and those who have caused harm. From Death to Life was founded in 2005, shortly before Johnson came to forgive Oshea Israel, the young man who took her only son's life 12 years earlier. She now claims Israel as her "spiritual son" and together they share their inspiring story of healing and reconciliation in the community.



Irwin recalls one of the students challenging a reporter by asking, "Why do you guys (media) only report on bad news?"

The reporter's reply was, "Bad news is good news. That's our business."

Irwin reviewed the main points in the keynote speech, "The Roots of Violence," by Dave Ellis and Filipa Cespedes.

"The key is for people to understand that violence is a learned behavior," said Irwin. "Since violence is a social construct, it can therefore be deconstructed through a process that involves individuals and their communities."

Irwin said that Ellis encouraged the audience to review one's own history, family and culture in order to begin the process of deconstructing harmful behaviors.

"We have to understand individual historical events also in order to understand why we react to certain things. 'Gangsterism' did not start in urban America, in truth, it can be traced to Jesse James and the myth of the American cowboy," said Irwin. "We have to assess our history and surroundings to answer why we do what we do versus assuming it's OK to do it and following repetitive patterns."

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