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DAILY HAMPSHIRE
GAZETTE**Show of creative outlets helps youths 'increase the peace'**

BY VICTORIA BEKIEMPIS

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NORTHAMPTON - Local youth unveiled a mural and performed a song and dance Saturday to mark the culmination of a weeklong violence prevention and leadership program.

The presentation, which took place in front of the First Churches on Main Street, was given by participants in the Help Increase the Peace Project (HIPP), which is organized by three Valley advocacy groups concerned with stopping youth violence: Community Action Youth Programs, Youth Leadership in the Arts, and the American Friends Service Committee.

As part of the project, about 23 HIPP kids, ranging in age from 10 to 16, took mural-art, dance and songwriting workshops to learn creative, non-violent outlets for anger caused by racism, ageism, sexism, and economic injustice.

Fifteen-year-old Orlando Soto, who led the singing of "Life" - a song written by the youngsters collaboratively for the event - said the song was a constructive outlet for anger.

"Singing and songwriting - if you have any feelings inside of you, if you're angry you can write about anger but you can't just flip out," he said.

Before singing in front of passers-by and a small but growing audience in front of the church, Soto explained the song is "supposed to be about struggles and how we pulled through."

Written in a matter of two days, "Life" discussed emotional distress and redemption, including as lyrics: "I've been going through these things too long/ I've got to let it go/ It took me a long time to get things right."

The mural, like the song, was a group effort in the planning and the execution.

According to 11-year-old Northampton resident Grace Eldredge, who introduced the mural, it "describes the good and bad things about life."

On the "good" side of the mural were words and phrases like "equality" and "no violence" and education for everyone. On the bad side were items like "greed," "war," various 'isms' of prejudice and a silver-and-gold dollar sign.

The mural was a mass of colors, in keeping with HIPP's emphasis on respect for others: The hands were painted different colors to show that race and other differences don't matter.

A hip-hop-style dance was also performed, and certificates were given out to all participants at the end of HIPP's presentation.

Sixteen-year-old Ismael Arroyo, who as a HIPP "trainer" led other participants in team-building exercises, said participants explored the root causes of violence and associated them with the eventual, destructive outcome in workshops.



CAROL LOLLIS

Hezekiah Adams, 11, front left, and MaLeek Adams, both of Northampton, dance in front of a mural made by students in a weeklong Youth Leadership in the Arts and Helping Increase the Peace Program in front of First Churches Saturday morning.

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"Everything is connected," he said.

Arroyo also credits HIPP with increasing the problem-solving skills and self-esteem of the group.

"I learned that there's always a solution to solving problems and that everyone can be confident in whatever they do," he said.

The HIPP curriculum leading up to the show ran from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day last week at the Hampshire Heights Community Room and, in addition to artistic workshops, included role-playing games to teach conflict resolution skills.

HIPP organizer Raul Matta, who has been involved with HIPP for nine years, first as a camper and then as a trainer, described this approach as "experiential learning," drawing heavily upon the diverse range of campers' experience in discussions to illustrate broader points about racism, homophobia, and sexism.

He said he hoped that putting the participants in the shoes of others would help them think twice before hurting others.

For some, however, participation in HIPP was a great opportunity to get to know children their age in a comfortable environment as well.

"Doing HIPP training is really fun because you don't have to hide anything," said Eldredge. "You can just talk here because no one will tell other people - things you've done, regret, or (are) proud of."

For more information on HIPP, contact Community Action Youth Programs at 413-582-7861.

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