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Diversity in Action: Partnership with YouThink Offers Peer Mentoring and Youth Leader Training for CSUDH Students and L.A. Youth

◀ Diversity in Action interns and middle and high school students from YouThink participate in an art exercise on skin color; photo by Lui Amador.

CAMPUS NEWS

Diversity in Action: Partnership with YouThink Offers Peer Mentoring and Youth Leader Training for CSUDH Students and L.A. Youth

The Diversity in Action (DIA) internship program, a partnership between the Multicultural Center at California State University, Dominguez Hills and the Los Angeles-based nonprofit **YouThink**, ended its inaugural year in May. In the process of learning leadership skills to pass on to middle and high school students from all over Los Angeles, the Diversity in Action interns ended up learning a thing or two from their younger charges.

Junior Diamond Haywood was impressed by the youth involved in YouThink, who she says “are very intelligent...They are very aware of what’s going on in the world and are able to give their opinions very clearly. They know what they want, they have high expectations.”



To enhance their interaction with the YouThink youth over the nine months of the program, DIA interns received training in multicultural relations, communications, and diversity leadership. In biweekly “diversity chats” the interns openly and honestly discussed topics such as racism, homophobia, sexism, and ageism in a way that taught them to be respectful of other’s opinions. Additional activities included an animation workshop, where the CSUDH students conceived, drew, and produced **PSAs on tolerance** with the help of industry professionals. They also took field trips to cultural venues such as the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach, Calif. and participated in **Big Sunday**, the largest annual citywide community service event in the nation, sponsored by the city of Los Angeles. The interns also got the opportunity to take the stage with California First Lady Maria Shriver during the “American Idol Gives Back” telethon and entertainment special in April.

DIA intern Latoya Getter remembers their Big Sunday project, working on the grounds at Robert Peary Middle School in Gardena. The theatre arts major was impressed with the way the YouThink interns were willing to get their hands dirty — no pun intended.

“When we first got there, there was nothing but weeds and patches of grass everywhere,” she says. “We put on our gardening gloves and had people pulling and pushing and trying to get up... just dirt.



“But they gave their hearts,” she says. “That’s the one thing that I love about the youth. They’re always willing to just get down and work. We came as a team, we all challenged ourselves and we pushed ourselves into doing more to give back to the community. That’s what this program is about, just giving back.”

Some of the DIA program’s “dirtier” work was equally as beneficial to participants. CSUDH students and their YouThink counterparts faced the realities of life in an environment as multiracial and multicultural as Los Angeles.

“[During] the last two weeks we had in the program, I really understood why I was here,” says human services major Fallynne Usher. “It was to deal with [my] inner conflict and how I address the issues that we talked about here. We talked about homosexuality, ageism, communication, a lot of things that will push buttons and make you think.

“This program has definitely allowed me to learn that one, my feelings are important – but I need to learn how to channel them, and that even though I can’t always express what I want to express, I can learn to do it in a different way to where I’m comfortable and that’s okay.”

Shifra Teitelbaum, director of YouThink, says that “it’s magical” when youth can realize they have a safe place to express themselves without fear of ridicule from their peers or censorship from authority figures.

“I believe that people are hungry for a space,” she says. “So, naming the space and creating some general sense that it is a place where you can come and be who you are and [share] how you experience the world is the way we sanctify the space.”



DIA intern Ronnell Hampton says that one of the greatest lessons he learned from his DIA experience was that “when you’re talking to someone and having dialogue, it’s not an opportunity for you to try to prove that person wrong. It’s more of a chance for you to have an opportunity to see the world from their eyes. People have their reasons for what they think and that is how they see the world. This is our opportunity to understand that.”

A junior in CSUDH’s negotiation, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding program, Hampton explains he grew up in a very racially and culturally diverse environment. However, he says that he often witnesses his peers reacting to diversity by forming cliques with those they are most comfortable with. He says that with the human relations skills he acquired, he is able to lead meaningful dialogues with them in order to help them confront their prejudices.

“The internship gave us a better outlook on how we relate to [other human beings], how we respond to certain things, and how we can be an example to our peers and to our colleagues in a work atmosphere and in the classroom,” he says.

Teitelbaum says that the power in the mentoring relationship between Dominguez Hills’ students and YouThink participants lies in the younger students having role models for their entry into college.

“Our students are intended to be college-bound,” she says. “It helps them imagine themselves in that, and helps them see kind of what they could look like when they’re that age. It’s more than just knowing someone who is a couple of years older. It’s also knowing someone at the next phase of the journey.”

Lui Amador, coordinator of the Multicultural Center at CSUDH, instructed and mentored the DIA interns through their human relations training, striving to bolster their skills with hard data on such things as socioeconomic disparities, class status, and world hunger.

"I wanted to make sure that they had factual information as well, so that it wasn't just about us talking about ourselves," he says, "As individuals, they are transformed in the way that they think and the types of things that they care about now and they stop and pause about things that happen around them.

Along with the grim realities, Amador made certain that the DIA interns would learn ways to make a difference not just on their campus but throughout society at large.

"I had to be conscious about pacing them and not overburdening them [with information], because they would come out of it sometimes just really depressed," he notes. "They didn't know what to do with this information. It was like the rose-colored glasses were coming off. You don't just open up all these wounds for people and leave them there to kind of just be exposed. Their ability to engage with the youth from YouThink showed them that there is an outlet for hope."

Two of the DIA interns have already begun to apply their new skills and consciousness to off-campus projects. This summer, Getter will be working at a high school youth camp in Hollywood and Hampton attended training at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville to become an intern for the **Freedom Schools** program. Haywood, who is the first in her family to attend a university, hopes someday to start a nonprofit focused on broadening the experiences of inner city youth in the hope that it will encourage them to attend college and succeed.

"I want to express to younger kids that college is where it's at," she says. "It's a growing experience, [both] personally and intellectually. In the inner city, we don't get exposed to a lot of things. With the program, we went to an art exhibit. That was the first time I had been to an art exhibit and I'm [already] a college student."

The business administration major says she is glad she took part in the Diversity in Action program.

"This internship has given me the passion to help and to try to make a difference, even if it's a small difference," she says of her desire to give back after she was mentored to succeed. "In a movie, someone said you change the world with one random act of kindness at a time. I definitely believe that my helping just one person makes a difference."

The fall deadline to apply for the Diversity in Action internship is August 8. For more information, contact Lui Amador at the Multicultural Center at (310) 243-2519.

- Joanie Harmon

Photos above: Diversity in Action interns Megan Martin and Ronnell Hampton examine photos of different types of people for an art activity on skin color.

Jesus Barboza, history/anthropology major, CSUDH, helps clean up the act at Robert Peary Middle School on Big Sunday.

CSUDH students and Los Angeles YouThink youth interns discuss crosscultural communication in Dominguez Hills' Multicultural Center.

Photos by Lui Amador