

THE BAY STATE **Banner**

Junior Advocates graduate Mothers for Justice and Equality summer program

Kassmin Williams | 8/28/2013, 10:54 a.m.



Youth celebrated the completion of Mothers for Justice and Equality's new Junior Advocacy Program with food and games at Franklin Park on Aug. 22. COURTESY OF MOTHERS FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY courtesy of Mothers for Justice and Equality



Leshawn Cornelius told attendees that the ladders on his vision board are symbols of him climbing toward his future. (L to R) Cedric Correia and Leshawn Cornelius.

Cedric Correia, 17, thought he'd spend his summer working an ordinary job.

That was until he learned about an opening in the Junior Advocacy program, a new youth advocacy program created by Boston nonprofit Mothers for Justice and Equality.

When he applied he thought of the position as backup in case he didn't find a job, but after spending some time with Mothers for Justice and Equality, Correia came to like the program and decided to see it through.

The summer program was the next step for Mothers for Justice and Equality in their mission to combat neighborhood violence in the city.

After spending nearly seven weeks learning the ins and outs of working a job, networking with local organizations and politicians and planning events, the 15 youth celebrated their transition from everyday youth to young community advocates on Aug. 22.

During an event at Franklin Field, the youth participated

in outdoor activities and shared vision boards they created over the course of the summer that described their past, present and hopes for the future.

Each individual's past was shown on the left side of the board, the present was shown in the center and the future on the right.

Some of the youth discussed hurdles they overcame in the past, such as the death of a family member, and their plans for success in the future, which included attending college.

A drawing of a red staircase stretched throughout Diamond Correia's board, with the lowest steps drawn in the past and the highest one in the future. Correia titled the drawing "Steps to Success."

A stick figure can be seen reaching toward a step in the present section and then attempting to climb the last step before the drawing continues into the future section.

One of the images posted in the past was a photo of Diamond Correia's cousin, who died at a young age.

In the section on her present, Correia showed pictures of her and her friends and family and shared a quote she read that she liked: "Be yourself, everyone else is taken."

The stick figure looks as if it's running on the final step shown in the section depicting her future.

Correia told observers that her ultimate future goal is to become a criminal investigator.

During the seven weeks, the group organized two park rallies to combat violence.

In the first rally, the youth marched from Mattapan Library to Almont Park, and during the second, the youth paraded from the Mattapan Police Station to Norfolk Park.

The program also taught financial literacy, which required students to keep track of how they spent the stipend they earned during the seven weeks.

Luisa Dossantos, a parent of two youths in the program, 15-year-old Luis and 14-year-old Leonardo Dossantos, said she appreciated the money management portion of the program.

“They’ve learned a lot in the program and I think it’s also a sense of them [learning] responsibility,” Dossantos said. “They’re getting older so them understanding the reality of life of having to work [makes me happy].”

The junior advocates also had the opportunity to meet with many local politicians and mayoral candidates, including candidate John Barros and City Councillors Ayanna Pressley and Felix Arroyo.

The highlight of the program for Cedric Correia was the

networking, he said. “We go the chance to meet so many people and I got a lot of contact

information from a lot of people,” he said.

The violence in the city hits close to home for Correia. He says he has lost a lot of family members to violence and has seen some of his friends get arrested after landing in trouble.

After seeing how the violence impacted him and his family, Correia says it’s good to have a program like the Junior Advocate program.

“I think the worst part about it is a lot of people my age, if you ask them if they know someone who’s been a victim of homicide, they could easily say yes or they know someone who knows someone,” Correia said.

“The thing about that is I honestly think it’s sad that so many people can say, ‘I know someone who has been shot to death.’”