

“Do the Write Thing” Gears Up for Another Summer of Youth Activism

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This summer, the Do the Write Thing (DTWT) program will continue its mission of providing youth with cognitive and emotional development through the exploration of issues affecting them and their peers, including mental health, gun violence and police brutality.

DTWT's two virtual cohorts, hosted in collaboration with the Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program, will culminate in a student-run virtual town centered on the intra-community violence that, throughout and well before the pandemic, has plagued District communities and claimed many young lives.

“First the youth do the research on the topic, then they have to script the different segments of the town hall: the causes of violence, the effects of guns and violence in our neighborhood, and the solutions to the problem,” said Lolo Smith, co-founder of DTWT, a local nonprofit that has been in existence for more than a decade.

“They have to script all three of those segments,” Smith continued.

“They have to decide who to invite as panelists. The students want some youth leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement, adults [like] the police chief or mayor, and someone from youth-serving agencies.”

In late June, DTWT and several other youth employment partners will host summer job programs amid a citywide attempt to give District residents some sense of post-pandemic normalcy.

Doing so for young people however, may prove cumbersome, particularly given the learning loss and socioemotional strife experienced in the virtual learning space for more than a year.

With greater focus on those circumstances, the Marion S. Barry Summer Youth Employment Program announced plans to expand its reach to 13,000 youths between 14 and 24 years old, encourage safe virtual employment opportunities, and facilitate experiences where students earn money as they attend school before going to their summer job.



▲ Learning is fundamental (Courtesy photo)

Participants in DTWT's upcoming summer programs will start their daily sessions with 20 minutes of mindfulness and meditation before engaging in socioemotional learning and the discussion of various topics that will prepare them for the August town hall production.

During the first three weeks, they will also take part in DTWT Co-Founder/Executive Director G. Sidney Nordé's seminar that's based on a program designed to tackle racial injustice and pandemic-related instability through the youth's creation of an alternative economy.

In years past, DTWT youth spent their summers channeling their curiosity and frustrations into the production of a dozen award-winning poetry anthologies. Last fall, the pandemic paved the way for year-long, simultaneous programming for students at seven District middle and high schools.

For Catherine Turner, a student returning to DTWT this summer, sharpening her skills as a poet and working with other young people proved to be sufficient preparation for what she described as a productive school year at The Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Northwest.

“I learned about being more of a team player. It helped that the other students were great to work with, and we collaborated well,” said Turner, a sophomore who produced video for last summer's virtual town hall, recorded her reading of four books for

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DTWT's virtual book club, and took part in a virtual poetry open mic toward the end of last year.

“Our teachers really encouraged us, and [this experience] taught me to be more of a social person,” added Catherine. “This allows you to see perspectives that are different from your own, see the world from different angles, and keep an open mind.”

DTWT participant and Banneker Academic High School student Michelle Tillery told *The Informer* that her involvement as a town hall co-host last summer taught her valuable lessons and helped her make sense of what she and her peers endured during the pandemic.

She, too, expressed plans to return this summer, especially as she recounted receiving a shoutout from D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser (D) during last summer's town hall.

“When COVID happened, there was no time to process, so having that town hall gave the youth in the program to speak about our experiences and the gun violence and protests that took place not too far into the pandemic with George Floyd,” said Michelle, a junior who also provided narration for DTWT books.

“The town hall showed me the importance of communicating effectively and having good time management,” said Michelle. “[As a young person], you have to be aggressive and not take no for an answer.” **WI**