





Photos courtesy Shorter Community AME Church

 Shorter Community AME Church

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Students from East High School trained to be peer presenters on the topics of race, policing and community justice through a program developed by Shorter Community AME Church, and funded by the Rose Community Foundation.

Teens Lead Communication about Race and Policing

Across the country, violent acts related to race and the police have occurred again and again. Dr. Timothy Tyler, pastor of Shorter Community AME Church in Denver, decided it was time to do something about it, with the help of local high school students. Tyler designed the project, “Race, Policing and Community Justice Advocates” to teach high school students how to speak about race, policing and community justice in their own communities. The project received a grant from the Rose Community Foundation (rcfdenver.org) last spring, allowing it to move forward in fall 2015 for the first time.

Dr. Jeanette Patterson, a former middle school principal, led the project and spread the word at two local high schools. A small diverse group of students from East High School in Denver signed up—one Hispanic, three African, three African-American and one white—to learn how to become peer presenters on these important issues.

Patterson began by having the students complete a survey to assess their emotional intelligence. She taught them about race and its history in our country. In the months that followed, students learned from and spoke with

professors, attorneys, law enforcement officers and other community leaders on race and policing.

One workshop taught students to better understand their legal rights; another allowed them to interact with police officers through the Bridging the Gap: Cops and Kids training program. They participated in other activities such as a privilege walk, designed to show how power and privilege affect one’s life.

The project ended with the students giving a professional presentation on what they’d learned, in front of other high school students at the Urban Youth Summit at Johnson & Wales University.

“I think all kids felt they were valued, their voices were heard and they were able to build strong relationships with their peers,” says Patterson. “They learned it was O.K. if they didn’t know all the answers.”

Through the course of the year, Patterson saw instances where the students’ attitudes changed. “One young lady came in feeling kind of angry at the police, but at the end of a session, she and the officer were hugging and trading business cards,” she remembers. Another boy was reluctant to come at first, but throughout the year, he became a leader for the group.

The project also allowed the participants to network for their futures. One boy who wanted to be a lawyer was able to make connections through the speakers and workshops, as did a girl who wanted to become a police officer.

HOW FAMILIES CAN HELP: Patterson believes that the “Race, Policing and Community Justice Advocates” model could work for groups in every high school, regardless of differing demographics. She encourages neighborhoods to host their own “cops and kids” circles, privilege walks or neighborhood support groups. In suburban and less-diverse neighborhoods, she thinks families can help by “being aware about what is going on in diverse communities. Read about it, understand their stories and volunteer in the community,” Patterson says. “Gifts come out of communities...all your resources are right there.”

—Lydia Rueger

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