

Tampa Tribune

Tampa Tribune, The (FL)

June 13, 2005

Anytown Fires Up Teens To Foster Acceptance

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Edition: FINAL

Section: BAYLIFE

Page: 1

Dateline: TAMPA

Article Text:

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TAMPA — "Yo baby, yo baby, yo!"

The chant rises from the crowd of kids, growing louder as their traditional call to attention takes hold around the room. It's Culture Night at Anytown, and about 50 teenagers are gathered to perform what is part pep rally, part infomercial, part theater for the parents assembled to visit their kids, mid-week through the summer camp session. But there are clues that Anytown isn't your typical summer camp.

Vivid banners tacked on the walls trumpet themes, past and present, of Anytown sessions. This year's message: "Keep the Flame Alive." As if in answer, the teens on this Wednesday evening occasionally break into fist-pumping choruses of "Fire it up! Fire it up!"

Among the banners, oversized charts provide details about participants, each name followed by spaces where the teens have filled in answers to a range of questions — nicknames, favorite foods, future goals.

Ethnicity? Turkish. African-American. Vietnamese. European-American. Guyanese.

Religion? Hindu. Catholic. Muslim. Earth-based nature-encompassing. Atheist.

Heroes? Martin Luther King. Mom. Mozart. Tyra Banks.

This is Anytown, a multicultural leadership program for teenagers sponsored by the National Conference for Community Justice. The umbrella organization has been around for more than six decades, working on the local level to rake through a broad range of "isms" and break down institutional barriers to create a more inclusive society. In 1950, NCCJ established the Anytown USA Residential Youth Program as the flagship opportunity for young people to get involved. Today there are Anytowns in more than 40 American cities.

Since the program took root locally in 1990, about 4,000 kids have experienced the weeklong set of workshops and dialogue aimed at opening them up to new cultures and fostering tolerance.

But the broader mission of Anytown, says Mike Trepper, NCCJ Tampa Bay director of education and community initiatives, is to help young people develop skills to go back into their schools and communities as strong voices for inclusiveness.

"Anytown builds connections," Trepper says. As co-director of the camp, he spends most summer days leading discussion groups and working with the kids. "This would not be Anytown if every kid came in believing in justice and peace and working things out. But that's what makes things special — when the kid with a rap sheet a mile long starts building a relationship with a kid who happens to be student body president. When those students start dialoguing and getting passionate about their conversation, they're finding a common place, and that's what Anytown is. Amazing things can happen."

A Target Of Intolerance

One week at Anytown changed Steven Oudit's life.

Now 18 and on a pre-med track at the University of South Florida, Oudit was a student at Wesley Chapel High School in the fall of 2001.

During those uneasy days, Oudit, whose heritage is Indian and Pakistani, became a target in the school hallways. "I was asked if my father was Osama bin Laden, whether I had a gun in my book bag, things like that," he recalls.

"There were only four other Muslim students in a school of 1,500. Some hid by saying they were Puerto Rican, but it wasn't hard to pick us out. We'd hear, 'Sand [epithet], go back to your own country.' Another time my cousin and I were walking down the hall and somebody said, 'Watch out — we're going to tie you behind our truck and drag you down the street. I was scared.'"

The end of the school year offered no relief. That summer, Oudit played defense on the New Tampa Comets soccer team, and tensions finally exploded. "A guy from the other team said, 'Sand [epithet], I'm going to burn you right now,' and he threw me to the ground. The ref had to break it up," Oudit says.

He spent the rest of the game on the bench, in tears.

"I just couldn't understand why people had to be this way," he says. "I kept thinking about what the world was going to turn into. After 9/11, a lot of people came together and showed their patriotism, which is great, but at the same time they viewed Muslim-Americans as stereotypes. It was tough."

Later that season, Oudit spent a week at Anytown. He had heard about the program from the principal at Wesley Chapel, who thought that by encouraging individual students to take leadership roles, the hostilities that had erupted after 9/11 might calm.

When he boarded the bus to Anytown, Oudit wasn't particularly looking forward to the week ahead. Spend six days talking? Any respectable teenage boy would sneer at the prospect.

"But the first night, we had this dialogue, and as soon as that opened up, it was amazing," he says. "It was, like, hey, you don't have to be scared to speak your mind."

By Culture Night on Wednesday, Oudit says the atmosphere was electric.

"We wanted to show our parents we're having a great time and learning so much. You realize that one voice can make a difference, but imagine what 55 can do!"

After that week, Oudit says, he was determined to step out of what he calls a stance of "quiet leader" and assume a more active role in his school and community.

"I no longer wanted to seclude myself from the rest of the world. I was ready to fight for what I believed in, to show people that not all Muslim-Americans are terrorists," he says. "Just going up to people and saying, 'What's going on?' or 'Did you go to the game Friday?' — just sparking up a conversation made a difference. I wanted to build that relationship with everyone and open up communication."

Building Cultural Awareness

So what exactly goes on at Anytown? Conversation, workshops and activities throughout the week begin with building awareness of other cultures, from creating the "Know Yourself" banners displayed during Culture Night to exploring the "Know Your Community" theme later in the session. Kids share ideas and get a sense of others' experiences "on the outside," as they call the world beyond the cocoon of the camp.

All the workshops focus on specific issues, Trepper explains. They deal with religion, gender roles, privilege and power, heterosexism, racism.

"We look at major issues affecting our culture and talk about treating people with dignity and respect," he says.

For Oudit, one of the most powerful workshops deals with stereotypes. In what could be perceived as a very non-PC exercise, the kids list all the stereotypes they can think of for particular ethnicities.

"It hits you at a certain point that the stereotypes just aren't true," Oudit says. "One African-American student said that he liked poetry, and everyone was, like, wow, we don't see you as a person who would read poetry — you're more of an athletic, rapper type. It opened our eyes. If we put people into classifications, we miss out on who they really are."

Camp Endorsement

Perhaps the greatest endorsement of Anytown is in the number of delegates who, like Oudit, return to participate as counselors and advisers.

Eric Clark, a black 23-year-old, attended Anytown at 17 and has returned every summer.

"Racism was an everyday thing in high school," says Clark, a graduate of Florida A&M University. "There was name-calling, violence — I got into a few fights."

After Anytown, though, Clark returned to high school determined to stop the cycle of prejudice.

"I left with a sense of knowing that I could make a change," he says. "I wanted to bring about better race relations

in my community."

Along with a handful of classmates who had been at the camp with him, he began a sort of sit-in.

"Our plan was to break up the lunchroom segregation," Clark reports. "We just started sitting at different tables every day, and for a while, the other kids didn't say any! thing; some got up and left, but eventually they realized I wasn't going anywhere. When I struck up conversations, they eventually clicked. Some of the people actually wanted to get to know me, and I actually made some friends."

He'll continue to come back to Anytown as an adviser, Clark says.

"Anytown is kind of like the lighter to light the fire. It gives you the right guidance to tell you that you can make a difference. It's all about you, and all about the experience. And I don't mind giving up my free time — this is worth more money than I could get paid, if I can better this society in the future."

(CHART) ABOUT ANYTOWN

Anytown, a youth program sponsored by the Tampa Bay chapter of the National Conference for Community Justice, offers one-week sessions June 19-25, June 26 through July 2, July 10-16 and July 17-23 at the Dayspring Conference Center in Ellenton, about 40 miles south of Tampa. Camp sessions are limited to 60.

Free to any student 14 to 18 in Hillsborough, Pinellas and Pasco county schools, the program is supported and funded by local school boards, the Juvenile Welfare Board and other private and public donors.

During each session, five to eight screened and trained adult staff members remain on-site, along with 12 to 15 high school and college-age counselors.

Charter bus transportation is provided between Anytown and a central pickup/dropoff location in each county at the beginning and end of each weeklong residential session.

Applications are available at www.nccjtampabay.org or by calling (727) 568-9313.

Caption:

News Channel 8 photo by ERIC HAUSMANN

Teens entertain their parents during a recent Culture Night at Anytown, a multicultural leadership program sponsored by the National Conference for Community Justice. The summer camp program promotes tolerance among Bay area students.

News Channel 8 photos by ERIC HAUSMANN

Anytown co-director Mike Trepper says the broader mission of the summer camp program is to help teens develop skills to go back into their schools and communities as strong voices for inclusiveness.

Anytown members, a mix of ethnicities from Pasco, Pinellas and Hillsborough schools, hug during a dance at Culture Night. PHOTO 3

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Record Number: MERLIN_4317242