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TRAILBLAZERS ESTABLISHES EDUCATIONAL PILLARS FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

JUNE 6, 2019 EDITOR LEAVE A COMMENT

by Carolyn Bick

In Theresa Hardy's Trailblazers class at Washington Middle School, change starts with a fundamental shift in how the class' middle school students view themselves.

"Either they consider themselves a victim, they act like a victim, or they think like a victim – or they don't understand what's happening to them. So from victim, going through the Trailblazers program, they become educated," Hardy said. "Once you become educated, and educated on how to navigate through the system, you can be successful. ... And from educated, they become educators."

Hardy is the founder of Trailblazers, a class started in August 2018 for youth of color at Washington Middle School, in partnership with King County's [Best Starts for Kids](#) (BSFK) program, a voter-led initiative started in 2017. The class is meant to teach Hardy's 26 students skills they wouldn't otherwise get in normal academic classes through a trauma-informed lens. It's part of a larger program focused on overcoming obstacles — particularly racialized and gendered ones — called [Inspirational Workshops](#), which Hardy initially founded in 2012 for girls and young women in YWCA shelters, and restarted for both youth and adults in a broader context 2017 after a five-year hiatus.



Students do work in the Trailblazer class at Washington Middle School in Seattle, Washington, on May 1, 2019. (Photo: Carolyn Bick)

Trailblazers has four pillars, Hardy said. The first is all about personal development and self-discovery to create a growth mindset that extends beyond school walls. The second is social justice, through which students analyze and explore systemic oppression and institutional racism and learn how to navigate and challenge those obstacles as they arise.

"You hear a lot that youth are leaders of tomorrow, or youth are our leaders of the future, but we really want to demonstrate that they are actual leaders now," Hardy said. "The Trailblazers actually put on a Black History Month assembly at Washington Middle School to educate their peers on what is Black history, and all the amazing people who created change before them who were African American."

The third pillar focuses on college and career exploration and asks students to seriously consider what they want to do with their lives. This is the pillar on which the students are currently working.

Of course, Hardy said, this changes all the time, but that doesn't mean it's not a good idea to start thinking about it now.

"They have the opportunity to learn about different colleges, different types of colleges, the route that they can take," Hardy said. "We base it on the first part of the year, which is all about self-discovery and goals, so a lot of them already know what they are interested in, their goal, their career."

A Trailblazers student's binder sits on a desk at Washington Middle School. (Photo: Carolyn Bick)

The fourth pillar asks the students to start working on dismantling the racism they experience and that they've discovered in their lives. This past November, Trailblazer students Kimilo Jahn and Sano Faty gave a professional development presentation to their teachers at Washington Middle School that focused on implicit bias and the harm it can do.

Jahn said he enjoys the class because he is surrounded by peers who share his experiences, unlike his white peers or white adults and teachers in his life. It doesn't feel awkward to try to talk about certain things with his Trailblazers classmates, he said — things like being underestimated because of his skin color.

Not only that, he said, but Hardy's tutelage has helped Jahn to think about Black culture and history from different angles, and cultivate a deeper understanding of the subjects. He also said the class has offered him opportunities he would not have otherwise had, like being on the radio or giving the implicit bias presentation to his teachers. It's given him a better sense of self, he said, and helped him to understand that he can be a leader.

Theresa Hardy teaches her Trailblazers students at Washington Middle School. (Photo: Carolyn Bick)

"In some cases, it depends on the situation, but I try to take control of situations that are out of control," Jahn said. "Like, if everybody is talking, or everybody is being too loud, I will try to quiet everybody down or try to focus everybody's attention on something else so they quiet down. ... I try to do everything that I can to help out in situations."

Jahn's experiences in the class aren't unique: according to self-reported data Hardy has collected through surveys, most of his classmates no longer see themselves as "bad Black students," and instead see themselves as leaders.

"That is why this program is so beneficial, and so important, is because we want our youth to see themselves as victors. We want our youth to see themselves as leaders," Hardy said. "We want our youth to important people who can go out in the community and create change and have generational wealth when it comes to knowledge and [money]."

Featured Image: Theresa Hardy, right, looks at a student's work at Washington Middle School. (Photo: Carolyn Bick)

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