

Toledo youths recognized as future leaders at summer program graduation

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BY MELISSA BURDEN / THE BLADE



Ja'shayla Hightower, 14, speaks during a graduation for kids in Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Ohio program at Keyser Elementary in Toledo on Thursday.

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About 39 young people between the ages of 6 and 17 spent the last seven weeks in training to become the leaders of tomorrow.

From the proud smiles both they and their parents had during graduation from the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Ohio's Empowering Future Leaders program, it was clear the lessons they learned during the summer break from school will last them a lifetime.

Marvin Whitfield, CEO of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Ohio, said 73 students were originally registered for the program. There were 39 who graduated Thursday.

"We have to earn the right to stand among leaders, and 39 of you made it," Mr. Whitfield told the group during graduation. "Being a leader is a choice. You have to earn it. The world owes you nothing."

Mr. Whitfield knows of what he speaks. He joined the organization in 2019. Prior to that, he served as a team leader and senior instructor on a Department of Defense contract and conducted numerous training missions for the United States Army Intelligence Center of Excellence training division.

His previous work experience includes more than two decades of law enforcement, where he served as a police officer, a police commander, and a special deputy with the Wood County Sheriff's Office.

"I joined the Big Brothers Big Sisters in order to help kids," he said. "I saw there was a need to teach kids leadership skills so they can be leaders in life. This program began in 2021 and deals with kids who live in neighborhoods with high crime rates, where kids are often victims or perpetrators. This program helps these kids be around a lot of different people and teaches them how to get along with them."

The future leaders program is for children ages 6 to 17, Mr. Whitfield said, adding they have had highly developed 5-year-olds in the program as well.

"We have kids with ADHD, autism, and other learning issues in the group," he said. "We try not to leave anyone out. It teaches children how to support students with these disabilities and it teaches children with disabilities how to react and engage with children without the issues."

The program moves to different elementary schools during the summer. This year Keyser Elementary on Hill Avenue hosted the group. During the school year, the program is taught at Keyser, Robinson, and Glenwood elementary schools.

"In the Toledo Public Schools, there are some behavioral issues that are not the district's fault but are probably because of circumstances the kids are growing up in and around them," Mr. Whitfield said. "The first pillar we teach, life skills, involves self management. There are rules they must follow to come in and listen to the instructor. They learn how to show respect. You should see the difference between the first day of the program and the last."

The life skills pillar also includes helping youth build self-esteem and teaches them about mental health, substance abuse, and building healthy relationships.

Leadership development, the second pillar, helps them analyze their strengths and weaknesses and set personal and professional goals.

The third pillar, cultural competency, teaches the kids about awareness of and sensitivity to cultural heritage. It fosters respect and appreciation for different heritages and embraces diversity.

The career development pillar helps the kids understand the value of education and encourages youth to enroll in post-secondary education or career training programs or start a career.

The program participants learn about different career fields through exploration and exposure to working professionals. They also participate in workshops involving components of Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics, or STEAM.

"The career piece shows them different career paths, from learning about AI to being a physician, working in business, being a teacher and more," Mr. Whitfield said. "We also teach them about politicians and how the government works, how people become president, and why it is important to vote," he said. "We had Ohio State Rep. Michele Grim and Toledo Mayor Wade Kapszukiewicz come and speak to them this week."

Participants in the program have to show growth and knowledge in each of the pillars to graduate. They must also have an 85 percent attendance rate in the program.

"This is definitely not a summer camp," he said. "The kids earn their diploma and they are, in turn, proud of themselves. Those who did not graduate this year can come back and continue in the program."

The graduates received praise and some advice to carry with them in the future.

Marie Bush Latham, board chairman, thanked the graduates for participating in the program.

"You are our future leaders," Ms. Latham said. "Be a leader in the classroom and on the playground. Teach others what you learned here."

Monique Ward, owner and CEO of Pozativ ProMotions LLC., said she began her marketing business when she was 24 years old.

"You are our next generation of teachers, firefighters, actors, and future leaders," Ms. Ward said. "You can do anything you put your heart, spirit, and mind to."

Ohio state Rep. Elgin Rogers, Jr. (D, Toledo) the keynote speaker, proudly told the participants that he was a graduate of Jesup W. Scott High School.

"You have to develop your cabinet as a leader," Mr. Rogers said. "Some of the people here will be in that cabinet. You will have to do things nobody wants to do. You have to be honest and have self integrity. There will be times that you may be by yourself when you are doing the right things and that is OK."

He told the participants they were not chicken but were eagles.

“In life you will make a lot of mistakes,” he said. “That is OK. Learn from them and do not repeat them. I know our country will be in great hands with you.”

Mr. Whitfield congratulated the parents as well, asking the young people to stand up and thank them.

“Parents are the engineers of what their children will become,” he said. “The pillars mean something. We are all born with potential. Very few people identify what their purpose is. It is up to you to find your purpose. That is your job.”

Madison Guy, an eighth-grade student at Toledo Early College, graduated from the second level and will serve as a support volunteer next year, Mr. Whitfield said. Madison will also garner a weekly stipend for working with the kids in the program.

“My mom told me about the program and it sounded interesting,” Madison said. “I started last year, and I was able to work with Miss Leah [Hampton]. This year, as an alumni, I was able to work with Miss Leah and the little kids and show them how to pay attention and other self-management skills. It was great. I loved seeing the kids do better each day.”

Madison said her favorite part was learning about cultural competency from Ms. Hampton, the program manager..

“I think that part really helped me a lot,” she said. “I am very active in gymnastics, and I am around a lot of people who do not look like me. It helped me realize that we may all be different but we have the same goals.”

Madison is hoping to earn a bachelor’s degree in education. The young lady would like to teach English at the elementary school level.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Northwestern Ohio has provided mentoring services to local youths since 1937.

“We never have a problem funding the leadership program because local businesses believe in it and they need future leaders,” Mr. Whitfield said. “We need donations to help support the mentoring part of our program.”

For more information or to make a donation, go to bbbsnwo.org.