

CAU in the News



March 2013

Community Access Unlimited's mission is to provide community access through effective and comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and at-risk youth, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives in the community.

LOCAL YOUTH DISCOVER HISTORY AND CULTURE AT READ-IN *Event hosted by Community Access Unlimited promotes literacy*

A 14-year-old African-American boy brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955 recently played an important role in teaching dozens of local youth about the importance of literacy and reading.

The youth members and staff of Community Access Unlimited (CAU) hosted a read-in as part of the 24th National African American Read-In celebration, designed to make literacy a significant part of Black History Month. The event featured CAU members and staff and guests from the community reading from selected works or their own writing.

CAU was an ideal setting for the read-in because the agency provides support services to people with disabilities and at-risk youth, including literacy training. In addition, a large segment of CAU's youth members are African-American. This was the second year CAU hosted the event.

Kashif Wright, support counselor for supportive housing at CAU, saw the read-in as an opportunity to mend the disconnection youth have with their cultural legacies and history, a disconnection reinforced through today's modern music and art and their lack of knowledge about the past.

Emmett Till was murdered in 1955, reportedly for flirting with a white woman, and his murder helped mobilize the civil rights movement. Recently rapper Lil' Wayne referenced Till in a song he co-authored in which he describes having sex with a woman as beating her "like Emmett Till." Till's family has decried the song as both disrespectful to Till's legacy and degrading to women. Wright agrees and wants youth to recognize they can express their history and culture in more positive ways, he said.

"The kids go around singing that song with no connection and no recognition of how offensive it can be," Wright said. "If I couldn't give them a better understanding of the whole civil rights movement, I wanted to just plant the seeds about that one person."

More broadly, Wright's goals for the read-in were to promote literacy, provide more information about the African-American culture and legacy and get CAU members more involved with different aspects of the arts and entertainment, he said.

Deja Benjamin is a CAU youth member who attended and read at the event. "I thought it was very moving," she said. "It was pretty cool that people at CAU who I didn't know could write poetry stepped up and read their own work." Like most CAU youth members, Benjamin spent time in the child welfare system. She read the poem "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou, with the lines, "Leaving behind nights of terror and fear / I rise / Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear / I rise." Benjamin already reads quite a bit, primarily mysteries. "Books I can relate to," she said. "I feel like life is a mystery. You never know what you're going to get out of it."

That was akin to the message provided by guest speaker Dr. Ronnie Boseman, an adjunct professor of sociology at Union County College. Boseman talked of overcoming the challenges of racism, learning disabilities and educational challenges.

"Having the stigma of being special ed and being told I'd never amount to anything and becoming a doctorate of education," he said. "*No challenge is above overcoming. It's not where you are that counts but where you're going and there are ways to get there. I never knew my father but I had mentors who guided me. There's really no excuse for not getting there.*"

Also attending were members of the Essex County Youth Advisory Board. CAU's Youth Advisory Board is the counterpart in Union County. They were joined by members of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, Sigma Nu Chapter at William Paterson University, and the Sancopha League, a cultural organization that does public speaking, mentoring and community service.

Howard Wingard, coordinator of supportive housing at CAU, noted that some attendees who had not intended to read were motivated by fellow members and staff participating, which was one of the goals of the event. Wingard left open a book of poetry by Angelou during the event and several members selected from that work.

"The youth really listened," he said. "It was a celebration about who you are as a person. Everybody left there feeling better and that they learned something."



Attending the read-in to promote literacy hosted by Community Access Unlimited (CAU) were (left to right) Kashif Wright, support counselor of supported housing at CAU; Isaac Abankwa, co-founder of the community organization the Sancopha League; and Jamal Magee, member of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Sigma Nu Chapter, at William Paterson University and an undergraduate student at the school.