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Youth forum provides kids with tools for succeeding in life

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Charles Williams, a student leader involved in the cultural affairs program at Long Beach City College's PCH campus, warned teenagers about the dangers of gang violence.

By Nick Diamantides

Staff Writer

About 175 students, mostly from the Long Beach Unified School District's (LBUSD) middle schools and high schools, participated in the Second Annual Youth Forum at the Pacific Coast Highway Campus of Long Beach City College (LBCC) Friday, September 18. Organized and hosted by 6th District Long Beach City Councilman Dee Andrews and his staff, the forum aimed to empower young people to become leaders in the community. During the event, representatives of various organizations informed students about the resources available to those who want to further their education and/or reach their career goals.

"Our neighborhoods are flooded with future leaders and the intention of this forum is to supply these leaders, with a positive way to lead," Andrews said.

During the event, attendees joined a series of "learning circles" that helped them connect with the local resources they will need to advance their education and careers. The circles also gave the students a chance to ask questions

and talk about the challenges and opportunities they face. The learning circles were conducted by various organizations which included The Long Beach Gang Reduction Intervention and Prevention (GRIP) Project, The California Conference for Equality and Justice, California Families in Focus, LBCC, **PeaceBuilders**, and Weed and Seed, which is an outreach of the Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services.

“During the forum, we shared the principles of building peace,” said Claudette Powers, a representative of **PeaceBuilders**. “We taught the students how they can create a peaceful environment at home and school and in the community.”

Powers explained that **PeaceBuilders** encourages children and adults to put six principles into practice: look for the good in others and praise it; show respect for everyone and give up put-downs; seek wise people as advisors and friends; notice and speak up about hurts you have caused; initiate a positive plan to right the wrongs you have done; and help others to overcome their problems and obstacles.

“We work with teachers, administrators, adults, park and recreation staff, Boys and Girls Clubs, summer camps and day camps,” Powers said. “We work with any adult that works with kids to give them strategies and techniques and give them activities to do that teach children how to maintain a peaceful environment.” She added that **PeaceBuilders** also works with young people to teach them how to be peace coaches. “That means they can help their friends stay out of trouble by using these principles,” she explained.

Powers taught the **PeaceBuilder** principles to four different learning circles. “I dealt with an equation, E plus R equals O,” she said. “The events (E) in my life plus how I respond (R) to them will equal an outcome. (O)” She explained that people cannot control the events that come into their lives, but they do have power over how they respond to them. “People need to learn how to respond in a way that will create the outcome they want,” she stressed.

LBCC Associate Vice President Clift Breland, Ph.D., also addressed the students who attended the forum. “My message was that LBCC is here to support the youth in any way we can to help them make the best decisions,” he said. “Life is about the choices that you make, and we are an option for our youth.” Breland explained the benefits of having a college degree to the attendees. He also outlined the tenets of the college promise available to all students who graduate from a LBUSD high school. “The promise is available through a partnership between LBUSD, LBCC and CSULB,” he explained. “We have raised over \$6 million to guarantee that any student who graduates from a LBUSD high school can have their first semester’s tuition paid at LBCC.” He noted that after the first semester, LBCC will connect the first-year student with organizations that offer financial aid to college students.

Breland added that, because of the partnership, in its admission process, CSULB gives preference to students who have graduated from LBCC. “That is a tremendous benefit to our local students,” he said. “We just want them to be aware that it is available to them.”

Throughout the four-hour forum, the students also heard brief comments from various speakers who encouraged the attendees to set goals for themselves and work hard to achieve those goals. Special guest speaker Reuben Martinez reminded the students that education is the pathway to improving their quality of life, increasing their earning power, and expanding their ability to participate in society. Martinez owns a bookstore called Libreria Martinez Books. He is involved with schools, colleges and elected officials and is well known for his numerous endeavors that promote education.

Former Long Beach City Councilman Mike Donlon was there too. About 10 years ago, he founded a program that works with the city and residents to develop skateboarding parks in Long Beach. “We work with youths across the city to design and promote skate parks as an alternative to the streets,” he said.

In his comments, Donlon told the students to not let anything stop them from attaining their goals, and he introduced three well-known sports figures who had overcome the obstacles they faced when they were young: Matt Ball, pro skateboarder for Birdhouse Skateboards; Ben Snowden, pro BMX rider for Hitman Bikes, Inc.; and John Povah, stunt team manager for Etnies BMX.

Ball told the students to do what it takes to make their dreams come true. “It could be skateboarding or biking, or being a veterinarian or a doctor,” he said. “Find something you really love and just pursue it.”

Steven Keo, 8th grader at Washington Middle School, said the forum inspired him to set his sights higher. “Even before coming here, I wanted to go to college,” he said. “But what I learned today made me want to go even farther.”

Adrianna Cobarrubias, 11th grader at Cabrillo High School, added, “The forum was very informative, and it really encouraged us to go to college.”

Andrews said he was very pleased with the forum. “The kids that came learned how to get along, how to keep out of gangs and how to stay in school,” he said. “I am glad that so many middle-school kids were here.” He explained that it is during middle school that many children make decisions that will determine the course of their lives. “We had the chance to show them how they can go in the right direction,” he said. “I am very excited about what took place today.”