

Youth Leading Movements for Change

An equitable future starts with an authentic commitment to honoring and fostering youth leadership. In many of our communities, young people are finding artistic, transformative ways to move the needle on social justice. Community arts educators need to recognize that work and, when possible, find ways to nurture its future success. As a part of that effort, the Guild Conference in Baltimore will feature the first-ever **National Young Artists' Summit**, a youth summit on Saturday, Nov. 17, providing opportunities for creative collaboration, leadership development, and peer networking among youth leaders, ages 13-24, from a range of artistic disciplines. With support from the National Guild, Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Health, and the CYD National Partnership, a working group of young artists from Baltimore organizations and across the country will design a full-day of youth-led workshops and artmaking experiences. The event will be free to youth to participate.

In the lead up to the summit, we spoke to three young artists and activists who are leading movements for change in Baltimore and beyond and who are engaged in the planning of the summit. They discuss their own activist work and how adults can provide authentic support, how arts educators have been involved in fostering their leadership, and how the November youth summit can serve as a platform for youth-led processes of community change.

Taking a Seat at the Table: Baltimore Youth Embracing their Power

Rashad Staton, Youth Engagement Specialist, Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore, MD

I am a student and youth advocate in everything that I do but by profession I am a youth engagement specialist for Baltimore City Public Schools (BCPS). That work allows me to support youth leadership and create youth-driven platforms. Previously, I've worked with the Center for Adolescent Health to help plan and organize numerous youth-led and youth-focused initiatives. I was co-chair of the youth leadership advisory network, which operates out of the Center for Adolescent Health.

My voice as an advocate was first inspired by the issue of educational funding for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the state of Maryland. I was a leading advocate for that topic and, to me, it is a modern version of *Brown v. Board of Education*. It is fundamentally about the de jure segregation that still exists in our country and the racial inequity reinforced through monetary policies. That was a movement that stuck with me and I still remain a part of the work, even as an alum of Morgan State. Another piece of that was serving as part of the leadership of numerous student organizations. I advocated consistently for student leaders to be at the decision-making table with administrators, in terms of pressing for social programming that the students want and that is aligned with our professional development. In the room where policies, rules, and regulations for the school were being designed I wanted to make sure that young people were represented so we could both understand the process and assess fairness. After graduating, I started seeing those same spaces that were created for youth that didn't generally have youth at the table when they were developing policies and guidelines. My whole goal is to minimize the

tokenism of youth leadership and the unconscious exploitation of youth involvement. Young people feel that and see it right away, and it shows up in how they engage and interact in that space.

How can arts organizations activate youth leadership in a real way? First and foremost is a focus on intentionality. Set your intention with the knowledge that youth are a vital asset and stakeholder amongst the adults. Have intentionality when you are doing the outreach and inviting them into the space. Recognize that their intellectual property has monetary value. The youth that you may work with are experts in terms of their own peers and generation and they should be treated as such, in terms of compensation.

Also, be able to adapt. You may have that vision that you want to execute on—and you may want youth input on it—but be open and receptive to changing your blueprint from the moment that youth become involved. They may have a completely different idea about how to go about it and you should have the flexibility to say, “that’s probably the way to go.” Instead of one option, let’s put two options on the table and see which one works.

Christien Wills, Student and Activist, Baltimore, MD

Growing up I had the opportunity to connect with Katrina Brooks, at the Center for Adolescent Health, and CJay Philip, founder and director of Dance & Bmore, an arts program here in Baltimore. Dance & Bmore has been an incredibly positive force in my life—and in the lives of so many community members—and it has shaped my ideas on what it means to lead and organize people around the idea of joy. It’s been an inspiration for me as I consider my future because, as a part of this program, you can see participants have a renewed sense of hope. Being exposed to that made me realize that that is something I want to bring to others someday. So, learning from CJay and being a part of Dance & Bmore has been an incredible experience and it has shaped my desire to have a deeper impact in the city.

I haven’t always had many opportunities to lead but I’ve always been someone with ideas. I know that being involved in projects like the November Youth Summit is a great opportunity to stretch myself and get a head start on being a leader in the city of Baltimore. Growing up, I didn’t always have a positive view of the city. But eventually—and with the support of youth advocates like Katrina Brooks and CJay Phillip—I was able to see the beauty of this place, the history of the city, how much richness it has and how much black people, and in particular black youth, have done in Baltimore. One thing I’ve learned is that the most powerful movements in Baltimore’s history have been led by youth artists. So that has inspired me to be more engaged in leadership efforts leading up to November, and to support my peers as we seek changes to the communities we are a part of.

I’ve already seen such incredible things happening in Baltimore between youth, art, and activism. Art is such a collaborative thing. When so many different minds come together you learn so much, you see so many different perspectives, and ideas that you’ve never seen before. All of my peers are coming from the same place of trying to build a better Baltimore and it is incredibly inspirational to see young people around me supporting one another, thinking outside the box, and mobilizing those around them to get out of their homes and into the streets.



At the November summit, for me, success would look like teens embracing the power that they have and seeing the outlets that they have to express their art as well as their leadership. Everyone has something that can contribute to society; we just don't always harness it. So, this youth summit is an opportunity to show adults that we can do these things on our own. It can be a demonstration of how harmful it is to disable us until we turn 18 and how powerful the outcomes can be when we're given the space to lead. For all the adults who may be part of this work, give young people the space to talk and to collaborate. When it comes to teens in general, our minds are still technically being formed, but together, we can really create something amazing. When there is a mindset amongst adult organizers that they need to cut-in, or intervene, or point out when something won't work, they are really inhibiting a hundred other incredible ideas that may have come up if we were just able to continue talking, brainstorming, and building together.

Artistic, Inclusive, and Affirming: Youth Activism in Detroit

Imani Harris, Student, Activist, and Mosaic Youth Theater Alumnus, Detroit, MI

I got into activism around education in Detroit largely because of a personal experience. At my school we didn't have an English teacher for five months, one of my other classes didn't have a teacher for a year—issues that I thought were normal but, as it turns out, these are issues many young people don't have to deal with. This type of situation is specifically happening in black and brown communities. It is specifically happening to us partly because no one expects us to do anything about it. Because that is how it has always been. I started off by writing a letter to a Michigan Senator about the state of education in Detroit, which was picked up by local news. After that, I was all in. Alongside Mosaic Youth Theater, I joined an organization called 482Forward. We learned how to organize, learned what that vocabulary sounds like, how to find a target, how to basebuild, how to develop as leaders, and then the organization gives you the platform to actually go out and do it.

Now, as an activist on campus at Northwestern University the thing that really excites me is involving other young marginalized voices. Often times I've found that the fear from these young people isn't that they can't do something—the fear is that nobody will care. I want to let people know that their individual experience matters. Even if you take what you see as a small action you are making a big difference. Every inch of change matters, and I think it's important to remind young people who look like me and

come from communities like mine to step out and let the world know that they deserve more.

Before Mosaic Youth Theater strengthened my activist voice, I would attribute my activism to my parents. My parents instilled in me an understanding of being strong, being who you are, being independent. But I think that Mosaic honed that strength because a lot of the work that we do is so independent. If you come to our rehearsals, we are being organized by student leaders. Also, after every performance we would do a debrief that was led by two student-leaders. In my junior year, I was able to step in as one of these leaders and it was an introduction to people looking to you and saying, "we're not sure what to do, how do you want to handle it?" Big issues would come up and I had to be able to make collective decisions—which is not always the case for 16 and 17-year-olds.

Youth that are leading movements for change are really focused on art as a tool for activism. In Detroit, we decided that, as part of our organizing, we wanted to hold what we called an "Un-resource Fair." We quickly realized that it was going to turn into an art show, because we knew that if we could represent what we lack through our art it would mean so much more. So, it became poems, and visual art pieces, and other mediums. As a young people, we are *in* the situations that we're fighting for. The activist expression is always going to come out in a unique way. Beyond that, movements that are led by young people are often more inclusive and more of a safe space. In any meeting that I've been a part of that is youth-led I feel safe to speak; I feel safe to object to something. For example, I was in a planning meeting for a march against gun violence and the majority-white group of young people was saying that we shouldn't worry about police rules around the march route because who cares about authority, right? But I objected, saying that this group may not need to be afraid of police violence but the people of Detroit—a city that is 85% black—do. I needed to speak up for those who have lost family to police violence and who need to take that threat very seriously. Because it was a youth-led space I felt more comfortable pushing back and sharing my voice.

In November, at the Youth Summit, I want people to leave the space different than when they came in. We often have this idea that activism looks one way or accomplishes one thing or has to fix a huge, national problem. But there are very real accomplishments that might not address the whole pie but make an important impact on a piece of the pie. I want people to leave knowing that what they are doing is enough—that they are enough and that who they are matters.