

**FLORIDA YOUTH IGNITE 'BEACON OF HOPE'**  
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If you were worried about the future, don't be. It's in good hands. That was the clear and vibrant message that reverberated from the 134 young performers who danced, sang, played and acted during the Florida Youth Culture Festival on Aug. 5 at the Florida Nature and Culture Center.

The lights of the Friendship Auditorium dimmed as the Florida Youth Music Group powered their instruments. Together, they set the nearly 1,000 spectators to grooving in their seats in anticipation of what their children, brothers, sisters—the young from all corners of the state—were about to present.

What those who had supported them had witnessed was the transformation of these young people, in their various stages of growth in life—many with just fledgling faith—come together to gain a sense of commitment and community.

“The Power of Youth, Beacon of Hope for Humanity” was the festival's theme. This became the guideline that brought the performances together.

“The youth basically wrote the script themselves,” explained Indira Jattan, one of the festival's main producers. “What you see in the festival are issues they are struggling with daily and about which they have strong opinions.”

The issues were expressed in nighttime street scenes. Tampa youth began the show, establishing a steadily building cadence by a “Stomp”-styled street drumming performance that accompanied a dance group. The dancers ended their performance by expressing their frustrations at being young today. “I am angry,” one called. “I am depressed,” another shouted, until they painted a montage of their struggles. Their segment ended with a call to fight their enemy—violence—by seeking their goal, peace.

Youth from South Florida and Orlando used drama to depict the common elements of violence and identify its root cause. Gathering on the stage in tight knots, illustrating cliques as if straight from high school, the performers demonstrated different ways of approaching life, from vanity to vandalism to class distinction.

Gang warfare broke out across the stage as rivals fought for respect measured by spray paint tags. Violence came home in the form of child abuse and in school as sexism. Finally, it came to consciousness as a single teen had to determine if his own struggle for respect through establishing a tag in the neighborhood gang is more important than keeping peace. It took an entire courtroom—dubbed “The People's Court”—to help him decide.

Should a girl be able to play basketball in competition with the boys, or is keeping her apart sexist? Jacksonville youth challenged this issue with a basketball scene where a girl wanted to be judged on her talents, not her gender. As she prepared to take a shot in a pickup game, some 70 members of the Boys and Girls Group came on stage and sang an endearing song of hope called “I Can.”

Even the audience was able to participate beyond offering standing ovations. The entire cast gathered on stage during the grand finale and led the audience in taking the Victory Over Violence pledge.

What had taken months to shape and build had come to an end, but in its place was a new sense of bonding and community. Young men and women who had been nothing but strangers before the practices started were now close. They had experienced so much.

“Before I became involved in preparing for the concert, I was in a bad place with my

life,” said Freddy Harfford, from Jacksonville. “I was unhappy, I didn’t have a job, I didn’t go to school. As soon as I got involved, things started to change. I started to study. I started to see results. I finished school and got a job.”

“Deeper than this though, I’ve changed. Now I think differently. Working with all these younger kids, I helped them and they’ve helped change me. They’re like my brothers and sisters. It was a great experience to work together with people, young and old, for the same goal.”

One supporter from Orlando, Kount Williams, expressed his pride at the development shown by the youth: “I’ve been a teacher and an assistant principle, so I know a little something about youth development. I can tell you I’ve never seen anything change kids so quickly into committed and concerned individuals like this.”