

**SGI-USA FAMILY YOUTH FESTIVALS
D.C. YOUTH SCORE COMMUNITY VICTORY
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Despite heavy downpours and some of the worst flooding in years, more than 15,000 attendees celebrated Victory Over Violence in a ray of sunshine at the Create Peace Festival in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 11.

For exactly 10 hours, the weather cleared, while Washington, D.C., Region youth led discussions on peace, sponsored arts, music and sports exhibitions, and directed games and crafts for children on two blocks of U Street, N.W.—a corridor known for its violent riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. several decades ago.

“This festival promotes youth. It inspires them,” said Beverly Wheeler, executive director of Washington, D.C., Mayor Anthony Williams’s Office for Neighborhood Action. “This event is truly providing a venue for dialogue among the area’s teens. The fact that teens themselves put this event on speaks volumes, and we are really proud of their efforts and support them wholeheartedly.”

The District of Columbia Executive Office of the Mayor, which declared Aug. 11 “Create Peace and Victory Over Violence Day,” was just one of the supporters of the festival. Co-sponsors included the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute, Interfaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington, American University Center for Global Peace, University of the District of Columbia and others.

One highlight of the festival was the Dialogue Café, where throughout the day attendees could be seen huddled in groups of 20 to 30, intently discussing how to overcome violence in their communities. Before leading a discussion on finding one’s purpose in this lifetime, Rajeev R. Kassat of One Common Unity, an interfaith organization, had participants practice breathing exercises to open the mind. “We want to demonstrate that despite our differences, we all have similar interests in some form or another and that this can be a basis for creating peace,” he said.

Other areas on U Street were devoted to exchange activities such as art exhibitions, where local artists could show their work and participants could view the Gandhi, King, Ikeda exhibition. Modell’s Sporting Goods, a national retail chain, donated a basketball hoop and supported a mini-basketball tournament.

On another block, The Syndicate, an east coast-based rave crew, played music throughout the day, in one instance playing side-by-side with traditional Korean dancers and drummers. “They were delighted to be able to play their music for adults, children and young people alike,” said SGI-USA member Mary Morris, The Syndicate’s festival liaison.

Washington, D.C., Region Young Men’s Leader Steve Wunder commented, “With this event, we hope to awaken young people to their potential as individuals, and help them realize the positive impact they can have in their communities.” Providing a place for all of D.C.’s diverse community to come together, he added, “guarantees an interesting and powerful first step towards a more peaceful Washington.”

Sponsoring a youth-led community event for people of all ages and cultures was a first for many SGI-USA members in the area, but even the younger children, who usually sit on the sidelines, enjoyed the day. “The festival was very cool,” said Julie Takakuwa, 12, of Silver Spring, Md. “Everything was fun, no matter what you did.” Julie performed at a

tree-planting ceremony for slain Metro Transit Officer Marlon Morales (see accompanying story).

The rains came late in the afternoon, but that didn't stop Maiesha and the Hip Huggers, a local band and headlining artist, from finishing their set. "Rain, rain, go away," they sang as the audience danced in the deluge.

Other artists and entertainers dazzled the audience throughout the day with music, dance and spoken-word performances. Al Afshar, owner of the Bohemian Caverns, a well-known jazz club, provided his building for the artists to practice and relax in. "I wanted to do this because it supports a cause in trying to get the younger generation off the streets and onto the right track," he said.

Latin Grammy Award nominee Nestor Torres was due to perform at the end of the day; however, because of the downpour, the sound crew had to pack up their equipment for safety and end the show. One member from the District commented, "Even though Nestor wasn't able to go on, we couldn't have attracted this many people and musicians without his support. This festival was far from a washout. We really created peace today."