



## Breaking barriers and misconceptions in the neighborhood

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Students practice active listening by raising their hands to questions that are being asked during the summit (The Gate/Gloria Talamantes)

Principal Barton A. Dassinger of Chavez Multicultural Academy welcomed more than 100 middle school students from six elementary schools across Back of the Yards for the Annual Youth Summit.

A neighborhood tradition for the last 19 years, the Youth Summit was co-founded by the late Sandra Trabeck, one of the [Peace and Education Coalition's](#) co-founders who passed away last Jan.

This year the Youth Summit was held on Friday, May 3 at the neighborhood high school, Richards Career Academy. Dassinger introduced keynote speaker, Jesse Iñiguez, co-founder of the [Back of the Yards Coffeehouse](#) and a life-long Back of the Yards resident after he shared a few introductory words.

"It seemed like there's this group on one side of the street, another group on the other side of the street, another group on this side of the street. There was crime and there was violence and there were problems. So the leaders of the community got together and said, *'this is ridiculous we are one, we are one Back of the Yards community.'* Dassinger said. "We've done things intentionally with that original vision of bringing us together even though we may be in different schools or maybe slightly different parts of the neighborhood, we're still one neighborhood and we have a lot more in common with one another than we have differences."

One of the many reasons why Trabeck initiated the Youth Summit was to break away from keeping people within different areas of the neighborhood separated from each other.

For many years, the Back of the Yards neighborhood has had invisible but real barriers between streets that separate the various gangs and people of different races. These barriers become

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Principal Barton A. Dassinger of Chavez Multicultural Academy talks about the history of the Youth Summit (The Gate/Gloria Talamantes)

psychological impediments that plague the minds of youth in the area. Often, leaving many without the resources that they need to have a better quality of life throughout their adolescent years.

One example of this is the experience of a senior student at Richards Career Academy who preferred to stay anonymous. They said they don't cross Ashland toward 47th street unless they are with a large group of friends who know the area. The same student will not visit the local public library or other institutions with resources in the area.

"Other people and I grew up here; we didn't cross that way because since we are from the other side, they always think we are gang bangers, so they start problems even

though we don't do anything. They try to check us sometimes by asking where we are from and all that," said the student. "The community needs to come together not just for one side of Ashland but for both sides; they always leave one side out."

The summit provides youth the opportunity from all areas of the neighborhood to meet each other and get together. Typically, Seward, Chavez, Hamline, Daley, San Miguel, Lara Elementary and Hedges participate in the summit each year.

Seward alumni Iñiguez, spoke about his commitment to the neighborhood and encouraged youth to give back to the community and shared with students on why he and his business partner, Mayra Hernandez decided to open the



Students pose for a picture before finding their places on the Environmental Science workshop (The Gate/Gloria Talamantes)

coffeehouse.

"We wanted to give the media something positive to write about, not only for the outside people who saw the neighborhood looking in but also [for] us because we need something positive. The second reason was that we wanted to provide a business that could help support the community," said Iñiguez. "There's a lot of good things happening and there's a lot of good people in different parts of the neighborhood, so it's good for you guys to meet each other."

The youth broke out into groups and alternated between a poetry workshop led by Chavez Elementary School, an Environment focused workshop led by The Plant Chicago, a three-dimensional printmaking workshop with the local Chicago Public Library branch and one on identity led by the [Chicago Freedom School](#).

Verenice Vargas, an eighth-grade student at Chavez, said she learned a lot about perception of self and identity during her time with the Chicago Freedom School. "I learned that we don't get to choose what people see us as but

we get to choose what we put out for them to see," said Vargas.

She plans on using the new information to help her identify things like stereotypes moving forward. "You can explain to [people] that not everyone is the same based on their race, gender or ethnicity," she said. "First of all, we have a really nice power flower and it let me think about how I see myself as well."

Learning new skills in each workshop, students came back together to enjoy a lunch provided by the [Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council](#).

Vargas ended the conversation with a message that resonated with many students who attended the summit.

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Jesse Iñiguez shares about all the career opportunities available in the coffee industry (The Gate/Gloria Talamantes)

"I realized what people would think about when they see a person. So we have class and we think about the upper, lower, middle which doesn't even really matter in my opinion. You can have money or no money, but it's not money that makes you who you are, *you know what I mean?*" She asked rhetorically. "I won't be assuming stereotypes based on gender, race or anything like that because you don't get to choose that. It can affect a person's mental state or [their] ways."

Racism, gangs, profiling and common misconceptions have created barriers in the Back of the Yards. Students are learning how to advocate for themselves and think critically on how they can change things. They are taking ownership of their identity and learning to be proud of where they come from and where they are going.

They stepped out of their comfort zone to learn from various students throughout the neighborhood by allowing themselves to be vulnerable and share with one another in a safe space.

With educators and community leaders at the forefront, creating more safe spaces for youth to congregate hasn't been more vital. Back of the Yards residents and business are conscious of a need for places where youth can hang out and grow up together.

For more information about Youth Summit Back of the Yards visit, [www.peaceandeducation.org](http://www.peaceandeducation.org)



Students discuss identity amongst each other and things that they cannot choose, like gender and skin color (The Gate/Gloria Talamantes)

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## About

The Gate empowers community residents through relevant and informative articles. With the support of community partners, residents and organizations, The Gate has become a catalyst of information throughout the Back of the Yards community and surrounding neighborhoods like Pilsen, Little Village, Brighton Park, Englewood, Bridgeport and Canaryville.

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