

NEW YORK Amsterdam News

THE NEW BLACK VIEW

Vol. 106 No. 29 | July 16 - July 22, 2015

©2015 The Amsterdam News | \$1.00 New York City

NYPD meets teens at Apollo despite vocal protests outside

By Tatyana Bellamy-Walker
July 16, 2015

After killing over 500 Americans nationwide this year, police are not faring well with youth. However, the All Stars Project hopes to improve this fractured relationship.

Last Tuesday, in an effort to better police-community relations, the Apollo Theater hosted Operation Conversation, a program that utilizes performance and dialogue to help teenagers in low-income communities and police officers who patrol those communities build mutual respect and improve relations. More than 900 NYPD officers, the most recent graduates of the police academy, and 425 community members gathered for an expressive dialogue about stereotypes, policing tactics and unpredictability.

All Star Project co-founder Dr. Lenora B. Fulani directed the ensemble and guided the conversation with empathy. Both cops and teens shared their worst life experiences.

Ariana Watson, 18, of Queens opened up about her family life. "I have been co-parenting since I was 10 years old," she said to the audience.

She, like some of the other teens, were made nervous by the navy-blue NYPD jackets that filled the audience. "I feel extremely uncomfortable between two police officers," she said.

NYPD officer Joe F. Fratto of the 33rd prescient in Washington Heights explained that it can be tough for officers to work in a low-income area, where their authority is not respected. "After being in a tough neighborhood, an officer's personality changes," Fratto said.

The conversation was lightened by comedic skits, which provided a dual message of laughter and sincerity to the crowd. The police officers spoke candidly about the community's perception of them.

"The hardest thing for me is watching a 3-year-old cry and their mom say we're going to take them away," said NYPD office Joe C. Carolan of the 33rd precinct in Upper Manhattan.

Nefta Richards, of the 20th Precinct in the Upper West

Side, explained that she was unprepared for the community's disregard of her position.

"The lack of respect that you get ... I didn't come on this job to hurt anyone," Richards said.

Members of the Revolutionary Communist Party, a radical political group, demonstrated in front of the Apollo during the event. After the recent killings of several Black Americans, the anti-police group disliked the theater's hosting of more than 800 new NYPD officers.

The activist group Occupy Existence expressed dismay at the theater's efforts on Twitter. The organization tweeted a picture of the Apollo with more than 100 NYPD officers walking into the building. "Cops and Kids' welcoming the 822 new grads. NYPD we still say no new NYPD!" Occupy Existence said via Twitter. The group then posted another picture showing all the new NYPD officers, following with the "BlackLivesMatter" hashtag.

After the event, NYPD officer Eric Martinez of the East New York area in Brooklyn told the AmNews that he can identify with the youths' stories.

"I've been approached by police officers when I was young for playing loud music, and I felt it was unjust," Martinez said. "It's not so much fighting toward changing the police, but putting yourself in their shoes. We don't know what they're going through as youth."

Dejanae Audry, 14, of the Brooklyn High School of the Arts explained before the event that she wasn't a "big fan" of police officers. Now, she feels content with the cops in her community.

"I used to think officers were robots, but they are human beings," Audry said. "They didn't come here to hurt me or hurt anyone else... they came here to protect and serve."

Since 2006, the All Stars Project has launched more than 100 workshops and influenced thousands of students nationwide.