

# Byron's Lens: 'The Diddy of Development' helps kids in a new way

BYRON HARRIS / SPECIAL TO WFAA.COM

Antoine Joyce's business card says he is the "Diddy of Development" of the All Stars Project of Dallas. "Diddy," because like rapper Sean Diddy Combs, he knows his target audience is poor kids, whose music of choice is rap. And "Development" because he's trying to develop a new way of engaging poverty in Dallas. Joyce's official title is City Leader of the All Stars, a program now operating in seven urban areas from New York to San Francisco, which hopes to build bridges in communities.

"I'm not gonna tell you I was a shy kid," Joyce says.

One of the core tenets of All Stars is to teach kids how not to be shy: how to be self-confident in a world unlike the one where most of them are growing up.

One way All Stars does that is through its talent show. "What we say to them is life is a performance, right?," Joyce says. "So you get on stage and you perform and you say 'wow!' If I can do that, what else? What if?"

The talent emanates not just from the performers on stage. They are set up, em-cee'd, and run (with some guidance) by young people Joyce finds in the community.

Joyce himself grew up in Brooklyn, a smart kid with a promising academic future who didn't know what he didn't know. When he was promoted from a mostly black school to a white one, he realized he didn't really know how to go to school. "It was more white. It was Jewish. It was Asian kids. They just knew how to be in school differently than I knew how to be in school and I wasn't smart anymore," Joyce says.

His rough patch at that school led him to explore gangs and drugs, which could have ruined his life. "Until I met the (All Stars) talent show," he says. Ultimately, he found a job at All Stars, which is now 35 years old.

He says the program is "a way to push young people developmentally out of their comfort zones." Part of that is the talent show. "It gives them something that's positive. And it's fun. Something to cheer on. And for the community members it gives them a sense of seeing young people in a new light."

Four years ago, Joyce came to Dallas from New York to start All Stars here. Now 650 young people have benefitted from the programs.

Beyond the talent show, the Development School for Youth, the All Stars second pillar program, aims to teach high school age students survival skills in adult society. In after school sessions, participants visit companies and learn about key technologies and what companies produce. That's followed by a paid summer intern program, where they learn how to dress for business, get coached in resume writing, conduct mock job interviews and complete a project.

Oncor, Ernst and Young, Amegy Bank, Hunt Consolidated and Bank of Texas, among others, are some of the companies that sponsor students in the summer intern program. Hundreds of other individuals and businesses pitch in with seed money. All Stars receives no federal funds.

Kimberly Kittle, Senior Vice President of Bank of Texas, says she was attracted to All Stars because of the stark economic disparity in Dallas. "When you tell people about the poverty



Antoine Joyce and a few of his best friends.

level in this city, they're stunned," she says. "They can't believe it's as bad as it is." More than thirty five per cent of Dallas lives below the poverty line.

If the Development School for Youth (DSY) addresses that gap right now, she says her staff learns a lot from the participants in the after school program, as well. She thinks the graduates will have a long term effect on the city.

On the last Saturday in March, dozens of All Stars kids fanned out across some of the poorest neighborhoods of Dallas. It was Community Action Day, an exercise to take the temperature of parts of the city most sensitive to poverty, while at the same time pushing the young people out of their comfort zone. They were accompanied by Antoine Joyce, his colleagues Carla Mancini and Raquel McBay, and other adults, knocking on doors and asking questions.

"Does Dallas have a race problem?," Lissette Fonseca asked folks, part of a questionnaire her team administered. Most said yes. At first Lissette was tentative, but with every knock she became a little more comfortable.

"What do the young people in our community need?," she asked. "Summer jobs, after school programs, sports programs, arts projects, service opportunities or anything else?" Most said: all of those.

"How about talent shows?," Antoine Joyce would add, where it all started for him. He often recruits talent show participants with these door knocks. "Most of the time when we're knocking on doors in communities, I say to the adults 'Hey, do your kids want to be in the talent show?' And the first thing some of the adults say is, 'that kid ain't got no talent'....and I try to tell the parent, 'We don't care if they have talent or not. That's not the purpose of the talent show. It's to get kids on stage and be accepted.'"

Progress he says "comes in one's and two's."

"We say in the All Stars, young people learn how to perform onstage and off," Joyce says. "And they build community and create new possibilities for themselves, for their community and their families."

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