

All Stars Development School for Youth holds a Zoom graduation, gets ready for summer internships

Along with the rest of us, students spent the spring navigating the challenges of the virtual workplace.



Nancy Lieberman was emcee for the All Stars Development School for Youth spring graduation on May 14. The event was virtual, but Lieberman has long been a partner of the program. (Kim Leeson / Courtesy of All Stars Project of Dallas)

By: Allison Hatfield, May 26, 2020

Nancy Lieberman was still on mute when she began speaking to the nearly 300 people who joined the virtual graduation ceremony for All Stars Development School for Youth (DSY) in Dallas and Chicago on May 14. It was a familiar sign of the times, unlike the No. 10 jersey that hung on the wall behind the former professional basketball player and Women's National Basketball Association coach. Many of the participants on the call weren't old enough to know the sports pioneer and emcee of the event, which included keynote speaker David Brown, former Dallas police chief and now Chicago police superintendent.

The event for 33 Dallas DSY graduates and 52 Chicago DSY graduates was unlike what was expected when the spring program kicked off in February. Way back then — it seems a lot longer ago than it was — students were preparing to spend 14 weeks in posh office environments, learning a variety of hands-on job skills. All that changed just five weeks in, when the coronavirus pandemic hit and those offices sent their workers home.

After that, on Thursdays, the students joined web conferences from their bedrooms, closets and cars. Most used cellphones, though lack of Wi-Fi was a challenge for one Dallas DSY member, said Vice President and Dallas City Leader Antoine Joyce, and some would need to log off and back on if their connections were weak.

At the Zoom graduation, Chicago City Leader David Cherry reminded attendees that COVID-19 isn't the only pandemic for the students on the call and their families. They know too well the pandemics of violence, racial injustice and poverty, he said. DSY is designed to give those students a chance to leave at least some of that behind.

To learn more about All Stars Development School for Youth, go to allstars.org.

DSY WAS DIFFERENT THIS SPRING.

Though DSY moved rapidly to virtual programming, COVID-19 caused some of the young people who began the spring program to put off their participation to another time, Joyce said. And students weren't able to do mock job interviews with corporate partners at their downtown offices, so they didn't have the opportunity to learn to navigate public transportation and get to an interview on time. Other skills, like in-person networking and conducting in-person tours of corporate headquarters and facilities, were also removed from the DSY experience once it went virtual.

But there were some benefits. As we all learned more about a virtual work life, so did the students. They got increased experience with phone and webcam job interviews, practiced professional phone conversations and email communication, and learned the unique pleasures of technology troubleshooting. Having conversations with family about quiet workspaces was also a new element for this spring's program, Joyce said.

SUMMER INTERNSHIPS WON'T LOOK THE SAME

In a typical year, DSY graduates would spend their summer working internships in the offices of corporate partners. But COVID-19 has, of course, changed that to a large degree. A few of the youth will get to do a four-week, part-time office internship. A few others will have virtual internships. The remainder of the graduates will participate in what Joyce called a Summer of Development program that will include weekly corporate workshops, cultural experiences, skills to practice and prompts to respond to.

"Graduation signifies an end and a beginning for these students," said Brown, who grew up in Oak Cliff and attended the same high school that many of the DSY graduates attend. He urged them to become adults who inspire the students who come after them. "With you working to guide us, the future is bright," he said.



David Brown, former Dallas police chief and current Chicago police superintendent, was the keynote speaker for the All Stars Project Celebration of Development. He's pictured here with past graduates, pre-pandemic. (Courtesy of All Stars Project of Dallas)