

Revitalized by summer protests, Dallas' inequity programs fight through pandemic's 'gut punch'

As the United States faces questions of racial inequities, more focus is on these nonprofits that work in bettering the conditions of underrepresented communities.



President & CEO at Big Thought Byron Sanders and Vice President of All Stars Project, Inc. Antoine Joyce pose for a portrait at Fair Park in Dallas on Thursday, July 23, 2020. Both men run non-profit programs focused on helping young people of color in South Dallas. (Lynda M. Gonzalez/The Dallas Morning News)(Lynda M. Gonzalez / Staff Photographer)

By Fernando Cervantes, Jr., Jul 24, 2020

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, local nonprofit Big Thought served youth in marginalized communities with educational programs like Artivism, the DaVerse Lounge and Thriving Minds.

But when schools closed, putting an abrupt end to many of the group's programs, Big Thought had to adjust. For Big Thought president and CEO Byron Sanders, that meant layoffs.

"That was hard, we love this team," Sanders said. "They helped us build who we are today, but we had to let them go and that stung. That was a gut punch."

The group had to lay off 62% of its employees, but has still worked to continue with its programming. Sanders said they've worked to bring programs online, but still had to find new ways to adapt.

Then, the latest wave of Black Lives Matter protests put even more urgency on the group's mission of addressing educational inequality.

"We identify race as a root cause of why we have to exist," Sanders said. "We're trying to close the opportunity gap between kids of color and their white peers."

Big Thought is one of many groups that have been trying to adapt to the current pandemic. Many have had to move their programs online, or found other ways to continue their activities. Others are still desperately trying to find a way to stay afloat.

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BRINGING COMMUNITIES TOGETHER

Joshua Childs is an assistant professor of educational policy and planning at the University of Texas at Austin. He has researched the role of these community initiatives to address complex educational issues, and said communities have long wanted a stronger voice.

"What we're seeing is a concerted effort to how we bring communities together to be involved when it comes to education and public health and providing goods and services that can benefit all," Childs said.

Austin-based Academia Cuauhtli, for example, provides language and cultural education programs for 4th and 5th grade students focused on the Spanish-speaking community, director Angela Valenzuela said.

"I think we need to double down and revitalize our cultures, and languages. Because that is how we will be strong and if we're strong then we can advocate for all injustices, with our African-American brothers and sisters," Valenzuela said.

Academia Cuauhtli's cultural revitalization program is based around a curriculum developed by Austin-area teachers to keep students engaged throughout the school year and summer.

But having to adapt to an online learning environment has given the organization a new set of challenges to tackle.

"We're trying to get resources so we can keep teaching over the summer," Valenzuela said. "We haven't got the support we're looking for, but we're hopeful that something will come through."

Although Academia Cuauhtli is struggling to find funding for summer classes, they are still serving their community in different ways. For example, Academia Cuauhtli recently received 350 masks from the City of Austin for distribution in their community.

"Now that we are a 'known entity,' there are groups that are wanting to work with us. I see this as continuing," said Valenzuela.

'IT'S ABOUT SOLUTIONS'

The **All Stars Project**, a West and South Dallas community initiative, was planning their spring talent show before the pandemic began. Young people ages 5 to 25 years old are invited to perform hip hop numbers in front of their community peers.

Every aspect of the talent show is planned and produced by young people. From the lighting to stage direction, they had been preparing to showcase their hard work.

But everything changed, and the students who had worked on their performances for months had to quickly adapt to an online talent show.

"With all our programs, we've had to move to a virtual environment," said Antoine Joyce, the Vice President and City Leader for the project in Dallas. "The pandemic has changed how we do those programs, we actually had to cancel our in-person talent show."



Vice President of All Stars Project, Inc. Antoine Joyce (Lynda M. Gonzalez/ The Dallas Morning News)(Lynda M. Gonzalez / Staff Photographer)

Now, with the current Black Lives Matter protests, the All Stars Project has had more people calling for information about their initiative.

Having to move to all-online operations due to the coronavirus pandemic has given the organization a larger capacity for their programming.

"We have experienced a wave of new inquiries and interest from businesses and individuals looking to get involved with the All Stars Project," Joyce said. "It's a recognition that we have something unique to offer in terms of racial equity, healing and belonging, and connecting young people of color to the mainstream."

These community organizations have been serving their neighborhoods since before the pandemic by providing necessary services and education to underrepresented communities.

Now, due to the coronavirus pandemic, systemic gaps in American society have become more visible.

Monica Egert Smith, Chief Relationships Officer for Communities Foundation of Texas, works with different non-profits around North Texas by providing grants and other support. She said those systemic gaps have grown due to the pandemic.

"The COVID situation has exacerbated gaps that existed certainly before the pandemic occurred," Egert Smith said. "We know that things like affordable housing, and affordable healthcare from high-quality childcare and some of the childcare and education needs that exist."

While Big Thought and other organizations like it have adapted to the coronavirus in different ways, Sanders says people are starting to notice programs like theirs may have solutions to problems addressed in recent protests.

"People are starting to realize the investment in our work is about more than charity," Sanders said, "it's about solutions."