

Harlem Youth Venture With A New Paper

by Ericka Blount

The Countee Cullen Community Center, home for several progressive youth programs and talented young people, has opened its doors for yet a new venture. The *Harlem Youth Newspaper*, sponsored by Rheedden Centers for Children and Families, is a new newspaper in the community that exercises young people's voices and opinions. The Black Media Foundation is also contributing to the success of this paper by providing editorial training and computer workshops for young people who are interested in working for the paper.

"What we have here is a true opportunity for young people in Harlem to have their views, perspectives and

vision honestly portrayed. The *Harlem Youth Newspaper* is a critical empowerment tool for young people in this community," said Shawn Dove, co-director of the Countee Cullen Community Center who also provides an advertising and training program for the young people in advertising and sales.

The paper will be available for college students, high school students or anyone who is interested in reporting, photography or any aspect of the newspaper business to work on it. In addition, they will be paid for their services.

"Clarence Sheppard and Natalie Byfield are the heads of the Black Media Foundation and they approached me with the idea. The Beacon School was established during the Dinkins administration," Dove explained. "One of the

important things that we do is youth development, the newspaper is one of the latest and greatest offshoots. By 1996, we hope to have it come out quarterly and in 1997 to be bi-monthly. Currently, we have a circulation of 3,000, we want it to be 10,000. Students will be paid for their work, right now we are trying to turn it into a full-time operation."

Dove said that they may start the cost of the paper at 60 cents and they will be looking for interested students in sales, writing, photography and those who do poetry, creative writing, plays and short stories.

Natalie Byfield, a former reporter at the *Daily News*, and Clarence Sheppard, a former photographer at the *News*, were innovators of this idea and approached Dove about it. They both

currently serve as the heads of the Black Media Foundation and as editorial directors of the *Harlem Youth Newspaper* — providing instruction in writing, reporting, computer layout and computer training.

"I realized at the *Daily News* that part of the problem of being in the profession, was that there were a small amount of minority journalists," said Byfield. "As far as the youth newspaper is concerned, we felt we were in a position to share what we have learned, so if opportunities came up the students would be able to take advantage of them."

Kids Wanna Be Down With It

"We are hoping that it will grow to a newspaper that the community can feel good about and the kids can respect. The kids can use it as a steppingstone to go on and do a lot of different things. Not necessarily to go on to the mainstream," said Sheppard. "What we should open are our own newspapers. We have to realize that what we have to say is just as important as what others have to say."

The premiere issue came out in July 1995 with a cover story about Giuliani's plan to eliminate free school transit passes. In the story, reporter Jermaine Mitchell said that most students interviewed for the story said that they would not be able to go to school on a daily basis if the passes were eliminated. Other hard news stories in the paper included, articles on budget cuts that

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Students appear to be down with the new community publication, *Harlem Youth Newspaper*.



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target the poor and financial aid tips for college students. On the entertainment side, there was a review of Mary J. Blige's newest album, a review of Ice Cube's movie, *Friday*, and a back page that was essentially a montage of well-written poems written by one of the editors, Tarsha Black.

Tarsha Black, editor, is also a 20-year-old student at Hunter College and an assistant for community organizing at the Countee Cullen Center. Black explained that this newspaper is essential for young people to have their voices recognized as an integral part of this society. "A lot of the newspapers like to use a lot of big words that some young people may not understand. So they are able to write in their own language for their own understanding."

"A lot of them were down and then when they found out how much work it was they got scared," Black explained about how they first got students involved. "But when they saw the first copy they loved it and they were like 'Look at my picture' and they showed it to moms and everything."

Finding Stories For The Paper

Erica Brownlee, a 24-year-old student at Hunter Graduate School of Social Work and also a Girls Club coordinator at the Countee Cullen Center, is another of the paper's editors. Brownlee explained her interest in the



Jermaine S. Mitchell, writer for *Harlem Youth*

newspaper: "I've always had an interest in writing and two summers ago I did some volunteer work with other nonprofit organizations and a literary journal, *African Voices*. I saw the flyer one day for the youth newspaper and I decided to get involved because I really respect and appreciate a lot of the work the foundation [Rheedden] does for the community," Brownlee said.

Editors revealed that the way they find news stories for the paper so far has been by talking to politicians, talking to people in the community — among them, parents and teachers — reading various publications and watching the news.

Nineteen-year-old Nathan Moore, who is an assistant group leader at Countee Cullen and a student at Bronx Community College, says that he wants to bring a whole new component to the next issue.

"I am going to be doing the cartoons for the paper," Moore revealed. "Through the cartoons I want to bring serious issues into the newspaper through comedy. We have some bad things that are going on in the community and all over the world, so I want to bring it in a funny, yet serious way into the paper."

For the next issue, editors say that some of the issues they want to discuss will include the raising of token prices, more about Giuliani and what he is doing to the Black community, health and welfare reform, and they will continue with their focuses on film and food reviews.

"For the next issue, I would like to write about voter registration. People only realize it is important when major elections are coming out, like the presidential or mayoral," said 23-year-old Lescene Gibbons, who is a co-coordinator

for voter registration at Countee Cullen Center and a senior at City College. "I think in the last election, the community really destroyed itself by not voting. I would like to use the paper as a way of expressing the importance of voting in every election."

"We do voter registration here and it takes a lot of people by surprise that a lot of young people know a lot of political issues that are going on that a lot of adults do not know," Gibbons continued.

Brownlee said that from their premiere issue, even though they did not receive much support from outside sources, they were able to successfully pull it off.

"For our premiere issue celebration, we invited a lot of politicians and congresspeople to come out and unfortunately few if any prominent people showed up to express their appreciation for our work," said Brownlee.

"It is unfortunate that when young people are doing positive things they don't get the support that they need, but if they were out doing negative things they would be in the spotlight."

"I would like one of the ultimate goals of the paper to be just that it become a strong voice in the city," continued Brownlee, "and really put out the notion that there is more going on in Harlem than guys hanging out on the street corners, and girls skipping school and getting pregnant, but that teens really have something to say and that it we are a force to be reckoned with."

For more information on Countee Cullen or the *Harlem Youth Newspaper*, call (212) 234-4500.