

Teens take giant steps to build empowering friendships of diversity

By Donald James

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

On Tuesday, Oct. 23, more than three hundred 9th and 10th graders convened at Wayne State University's Student Center to participate in the Giant Step Teen Conference. Touted as Michigan's longest-running conference that unites diverse teens, young people interacted and discussed issues and topics generic to ninth and tenth graders.

Under the auspices of Wayne State's Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, the conference provided a think-tank platform, where each youth had an opportunity to convey his or her thoughts and opinions on such topics as bullying, civility, conflict resolution, diversity, tolerance, self-image, career planning, and even politics. Delivering the conference's keynote address was Arianna Quan, who in 2016 was crowned the first Asian American Miss Michigan. The conference was free of charge.

According to the event organizers, conference attendees represented 41 schools and other organizations throughout southeast Michigan. The students also represented an array of ethnicities, cultures, religions and social/economic statuses.

"The mission of the Giant Step Teen Conference is to bring together students from very different backgrounds,"



said Cheryl Deep, Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute's director of communications and media relations. "We had students from urban, suburban, public, private, parochial, magnet and charter settings. Some students came from as far away as Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, but many students were as close as Detroit and Utica."

While students arrived together from their respective schools or organizations, conference organizers required attendees to sit at tables with students they had not met, and

that represented other ethnicities and cultures.

"The teens enjoyed experiencing something new, something different," said Richard M. Thomas II, chairman of the conference's steering committee. "The conference provided a platform to help diverse teens realize they have more in common than they have different."

Thomas' wife, Dr. Sonya Thomas, who served as the conference's co-chair agreed.

"With what's going on today in our society, this conference

was important," she said. "We need to encourage young people to be open minded on diversity and learn that they do have more in common with other young people of diverse backgrounds."

Giant Step Teen Conference is the brainchild of the late Mary Agnes Davis, who in partnership with Co-Ette Club of Detroit organized the first conference in 1983. Davis was a progressive social workers and community leader, who saw high school teens had few opportunities to interact with

peers from different social, ethnic, geographic and cultural groups.

Near the end of the 2018 conference, one student representative from each table reported to event attendees what was discussed and learned at the table. Students from each table also exchanged phone numbers and social media information to stay connected after the conference.

"We all got along because we discovered that we all have the same things that make us tick," said Kenneth, who attends Ben Carson High School of Science and Medicine in Detroit. "I'm going to try my hardest to keep the friendships I formed today as long as I can."

According to both Richard and Sonya Thomas, planning for the 2019 Giant Step Teen Conference will start soon.

"After a wrap up meeting on Nov. 14, we will meet again in February to begin planning our next conference," said Sonya Thomas, who has been connected with the Giant Step Teen Conference for 17 years. "The annual conference is always held near the end of October. As always, we look for ways to improve each conference from one year to the next."

For more information about the 2019 Giant Step Teen Conference, to include attending or becoming a sponsor or volunteer, call 313.664.2500 or log on to www.mpsi.wayne.edu.