

Yo:Durham discusses Martin case

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A group of Durham teenagers gathered in a large room in Duke Memorial United Methodist Church on Monday, April 2, to discuss the shooting of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin. As part of the YO:Durham program, these 14 students expressed their emotions and conveyed their opinions on the death of Martin, an unarmed African-American boy shot and killed in Sanford, Fla., on Feb. 26, 2012.

The assailant in the shooting was George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old community watch coordinator who shot Martin as the boy walked from a convenience store to his father's fiancée's house. Zimmerman told police that the shooting was self-defense and has been subsequently protected under Florida's Stand Your Ground law.

YO:Durham, which began in 2007, is an organization based in Durham that educates and prepares youth for career opportunities they otherwise probably would not encounter. The program is structured around a "Year of Opportunity."

"During their year of enrollment, YO:Durham helps students develop skills for success in school and work, while directing them away from harmful and illegal activities," says Susan M. Blackmon, the program director for YO:Durham.

"YO:Durham is strong in that it knits a network of support for the students among staff, volunteer mentors, employers, school staff and family members."

Monday's discussion was sparked after Eric Olson-Getty, internship and mentor coordinator for YO:Durham, was approached by a student.

"This student was feeling shaken by the killing of Trayvon Martin and the events surrounding his case," says Olson-Getty.

"I can't walk into a building with a hood or a hat on without feeling like a criminal."

Sharif Rubin, sophomore



YO:Durham, a career-focused mentoring group for Durham teens, was founded in 2007. (Staff photo by Jagir Patel)

According to Olson-Getty, the discussion not only aimed to provide a safe space for students to process and express their feelings, but also hoped to provide students with timely and accurate information about the case so they could be better equipped to raise awareness of the case among their groups.

"Have you ever felt labeled based on the color of your skin or what you have been wearing?" Blackmon asked to students on the onset of the discussion. Voices sprang from the group, many stemming from anger and outrage regarding Zimmerman's actions and defense.

"I can't walk into a building with a hood or a hat on without feeling like a criminal," says Sharif Rubin, a YO:Durham sophomore student from Josephine Dobbs Clement Early College High School.

Rubin, who also interns as a staff writer for The Durham VOICE, feels that students can have an impact by raising awareness about the shooting.

Other YO:Durham students engaged in the discussion by offering ideas on how to alleviate the shooting's impact.

"We should not make it a racial thing," says Shiree Mitchell, a YO:Durham sophomore student from Hillside High School.

"It is about making sure that everyone, especially younger kids, know what is right and what is wrong."

As the conversation ended, hope lingered in the air. Action steps were written by YO:Durham students in an effort to continue the discussion beyond the room in which it was held.

"YO:Durham students are by definition hungry for knowledge, experience and guidance," says Olson-Getty.

"The situation with Trayvon Martin has galvanized them to be more engaged and to express their anger and outrage over the situation. I don't think this is any different from any of their peers. Youth everywhere are speaking up because young people, especially African-American youth, identify with Trayvon—the shooting could have happened to any of them."

ABOUT YO:DURHAM

YO:Durham is an initiative of Durham Congregations In Action (DCIA). DCIA is an organization of churches, synagogues and mosques committed to creating a community of justice and peace. Visit www.yodurham.org for more info.