

EDCI gets youth involved with their community

East Durham Children's Initiative uses its Youth Leadership Council to showcase kids' leadership skills

By Thaddeus Berglund

DURHAM – For the East Durham Children's Initiative (EDCI), learning goes beyond just academics.

With their Youth Leadership Council (YLC), the EDCI is teaching children to become leaders in their community, while promoting health and well-being among their peers.

The YLC is a program for fourth-graders and fifth-graders at Y.E. Smith Elementary and Maureen Joy Charter School. It allows students to create their own projects and events for their school – which focus on healthy eating, physical fitness, and learning leadership and other valuable life skills.

Lorissa Williams, the youth health leadership project coordinator for the EDCI, said one thing that makes the YLC special is that they're "really allowing the kids to make it their own thing."

The students – along with help from the EDCI, volunteers from nearby J.D. Clement Early College High School, and the NCCU Campus Recreation – are planning to host a food-truck rodeo to highlight healthy cooking and eating practices at Maureen Joy Charter School, and a sports field day on March 11 that will benefit cancer research at Y.E. Smith Elementary.

These events and others are funded by a grant of \$200,000 from GlaxoSmithKline – part of their effort to promote healthy youth.

One volunteer, Lisee Morales, 17, a senior at J.D. Clement Early College, began working with the EDCI and the YLC last fall. She said the program helps prove a point.

"Children have so much potential," she said. "But people sometimes people don't see it."

Morales said the YLC helps to change that by catching students



Brianna, Destinee, Kenisha and others doing a Zumba routine that was taught by Lorissa Williams at the end of the YLC Kickoff at the Salvation Army on Saturday, October 22, 2016. Photo courtesy of the East Durham Children's Initiative.

"Children have so much potential, but people sometimes don't see it."

Lisee Morales, YCL Volunteer

while they're still young and allowing them to find themselves.

Morales and other volunteers work for several hours a week inside the EDCI office coordinating events for the YLC, while also learning valuable professional skills by helping with, and participating in, the events at the elementary schools.

Williams said she praises everything the high school volunteers do for the program, from mentoring the children to working in the office.

"We are lucky to have those two," said Williams about the youth volunteers.

Morales said seeing the children's growth since she began working with them in October is rewarding. She said a few of the

students were reluctant to get involved at first, but quickly became willing to engage with each other.

Williams had a similar sentiment and said the difference in the children's attitudes has been amazing, because on the first day, no one wanted to talk.

She also attributed the growth of the students in part to way the programs are "taking them out of their comfort zone."

While the YLC is an important part of what the EDCI does, they also run many other programs targeted at helping children in East Durham. They recently completed a sock and coat drive that received over 300 coats, hats and socks for the families they serve. They also host a weekly walking group that utilizes the Healthy Mile Trail and will be holding weekly workshops focusing on health topics such as diabetes, strength training, and Zumba.

YLC Meeting Times:
Tuesday, 4 to 6 p.m. Friday, 3 to 4 p.m.