

Peace Camp helps Cleveland kids solve problems without violence

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The kids shouted the message.

"I'm conscious, I'm aware, and I'm empowered!" they chanted as they clapped and marched into their Peace Camp celebration, the culmination of six weeks of conflict resolution and motivation taught by Peace in the Hood.

"Yeah!" interjected Khalid Samad, executive director of the group, which works with gang members and at-risk youths. "Peace Camp!"

Boys sported sunglasses; girls flaunted red- and green-patterned skirts. And everyone grooved in their matching T-shirts as they filed in.

"Can I get a remix!" someone yells, and the chanting stops. The mike is passed as campers, teenage counselors and staff announce what they want to be when they grow up: a basketball player, a football player, a veterinarian, an actress, a millionaire, a professor.

"There's a seed hopefully planted in the minds of our young people," Samad said. "They don't have to continue to replicate behavior that's self-destructive."

The camp in Cleveland's Mount Pleasant neighborhood was the first ever held by Peace in the Hood.

The theme? "Don't shout it out, don't fight it out. Peace it out." The activities? Normal summer fare, such as basketball, swimming and a trip to the zoo, as well as African history lessons, African dance and yoga, which organizers extolled as a practice of self-control.

The group of 40 campers included three children who had relatives killed this summer in gun violence, Samad said. Two counselors also witnessed shots fired at a neighborhood store.

"We don't sugarcoat," Samad said.

Kids made posters with sayings like "Murder is madness" to hang on the walls of the Masonic Temple for Saturday's showcase of dance, African drumming and poetry.

"We learned a better way to be peaceful, how to deal with anger," said Jonathan Brown, a counselor and soon-to-be Glenville High School senior who demonstrated yoga in his basketball shoes.

But the kids also had a good time.

Kayla Morton, 9, loves African dance so much, she now wants to be a professional.

"It's amazing," her mother, Nicole Morton, said of the camp, adding that her two daughters have been more helpful around the house because of it. "They learn to be leaders instead of followers."

At the celebration, on the floor, Kayla was all concentration, her brow furrowed as she clapped and jumped and whirled.

"It's fun," she said. "You can do a lot of stuff, and it helps us get along." To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: ljohnsto@plaind.com, 216-999-4115