

## High school students dissect immigration, hate crimes, fake news at youth-led conference



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

*Belkis Montas (left) has a discussion with Mageney Omar at the youth-led “Looking Back & Looking Forward: Writing to Defend Democracy” conference in Roxbury.*

**By Rowan Walrath** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | SEPTEMBER 30, 2017

Clinton Nguyen, a 17-year-old senior at John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, believes immigration is key to America’s beauty.

When he told his parents he would lead a session on immigration at Teens in Print’s first-ever youth conference, they were “delighted,” he said. Nguyen’s parents immigrated from Vietnam. “It hit home for them,” Nguyen said. “They just wanted the stigma against immigration to be essentially crushed.”

Nguyen joined dozens of high school students from across Boston for “Looking Back & Looking Forward: Writing to Defend Democracy” on Saturday. The conference is the brainchild of Carla Gualdron, Teens in Print’s program director.

“What we’re really trying to hone in on today is the importance of sharing your story,” Gualdron said. “We’re here today to get students to share their story and write your truth.”

Launched by WriteBoston and the Boston Globe in 2004, Teens in Print is a citywide youth newspaper written by Boston public high school students. It is published five times a year.

Gualdron and Sarah Poulter, WriteBoston’s executive director, believe that writing can empower teens: they can “write their own narrative, speak back to power,” Poulter said. Gualdron is an alumna of Teens in Print — she wrote for the paper when she was a student at Media Communication Technology High School in West Roxbury.

Saturday belonged to the current Teens in Print writers. The high school students were the planners, session leaders, and attendees.

“I’d like to put the emphasis on the youth aspect of this youth conference,” Nguyen said. “The future relies upon the youth. They are going to be the ones who step up once the adults step down.”

Most of the conference was structured around three sessions: “Journalism in a ‘Fake News’ Era,” “Combating Hate Crimes,” and “Immigration 101.” Students designed the workshops over the summer with the help of WriteBoston and media professionals.

Kelly Thai, an 18-year-old senior at John D. O’Bryant School of Mathematics and Science, led the fake news session. To prepare, she conducted surveys of Boston youth.

In response to the question “How well do you think you can identify fake news?” most people answered 2 or 3 on a scale of 1 to 5, Thai said. However, she said the workshops didn’t correlate.

“The students were really engaging,” Thai said, adding that they asked clarifying questions and made additional points. “I learned that they knew more than I thought they would from the surveys.”

For the “Immigration 101” session, Nguyen was accompanied by Celina Barrios-Millner, an immigrant integration fellow with the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Advancement. The two led a discussion on people’s personal experiences with immigration and reactions to immigrants. Barrios-Millner also provided resources for higher education.

“Amidst Trump’s presidential election and all the things he’s been saying, we just have to start with the youth and not only acknowledge them, but also teach them,” Nguyen said. “Trump, he’s not necessarily the best-spoken person about [immigration].”

President Trump was the impetus for many of Saturday's conversations. In "Combating Hate Crimes," session leader Rose Koumbassa, a junior at Cristo Rey Boston High School, began with a statistic: hate crimes rose by 20 percent in 2016, fueled by Trump's election.

"[Our goals were] one, teach teens around Boston on what to do in the situation of a hate crime," said Koumbassa, 17. "And we actually want people to know the definition of a hate crime." That way, she said, high school students could differentiate between hate crime and bullying cases in schools.

Koumbassa and Carlos Rojas, Youth on Board special project director, had the students in the session write down stereotypes associated with three groups: black, Latinx, and Muslim.

"A lot of people weren't actually surprised by a lot of the things in the bucket," Koumbassa said. "One girl did say a lot of the things in the buckets were things Donald Trump says, or if not says, that he condones."

As a writer for Teens in Print, Koumbassa has written about issues based on some personal experiences, including affirmative action, skin-bleaching products in African-American communities, natural hair, and catcalling.

After two iterations of each session, split by lunch donated by Anna's Taqueria and Au Bon Pain, the students watched three "pop-up magazine" spoken word pieces, and they ended at a community resources fair.

However, Poulter, the WriteBoston director, said her favorite part was seeing the high schoolers meet and "actually listen to" one another throughout the day — during sessions, at lunch, while they were waiting for speakers to take the stage.

"[I enjoyed] watching the young people coming from completely different schools, different neighborhoods, come together and genuinely connect with each other," Poulter said. "I think I heard one student say, especially in the hate crimes workshop, 'It was really important for me to learn that I'm not alone in these experiences.'"

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