



ARENA STAGE'S FINAL REPORT TO
FRIENDS OF SOUTHWEST DC – 2018/19 PROGRAMS

Voices of Now

Friends of Southwest DC kindly contributed \$1,800 this year toward Voices of Now's Jefferson Ensemble. The Voices of Now program originated at Jefferson Middle School Academy over a decade ago, offering students an arts education outlet.

Voices of Now began this season in the Fall of 2018 with workshops led by Arena's teaching artists. These workshops focused on helping young artists develop and expand their skills in creative movement, discourse, performance, writing and more. While 85 workshops were conducted with various partner organization and schools from October to December, Jefferson Academy's 5 Voices of Now workshops each attracted about 10 to 12 students throughout the fall and culminated in an audition in December. The six students that encompass the 2018/19 Jefferson Ensemble have been meeting every Tuesday and Thursday at Arena Stage since January to create and rehearse their original pieces of theater.

This year, the majority of the ensemble members are female sixth graders who are new to the program, and their excitement and dedication has shown through. The students take pride in arriving on time for their rehearsals and encourage their classmates to be prompt as well. The group also has great physicality and has far exceeded expectations in executing choreography for their show titled *Stronghold*. In rehearsals, students have been exploring the components that make a community strong and what the responsibilities of citizens are to their communities. In past years, the theme of the play developed from students' discussions students in early rehearsals, but Arena's teaching artists picked the topic this year in an effort to give students ample time to write and work on their play and solidify their work for the performance at the Voices of Now Festival in May. This has also given the Ensemble time to examine their own roles in the Southwest D.C. community.

Students have also participated in brainstorming sessions, writing about what their community means to them and the experiences—both positive and negative—that they have had in the neighborhood. Overall, these conversations have made rehearsals a safe space for students as they become more comfortable with one another and open up to one another, sharing their stories of regret, difficulties, and challenges in their daily lives.

The group has also had an opportunity to share a piece of their play with the community. Parents came to the Jefferson Family Night in mid-March and gave very positive feedback about the questions the play made them ask themselves. Looking forward, these opportunities hopefully will prepare students for the Voices of Now Festival and help them feel like they are part of a community of peers also looking into the issues they see in their communities.

Rehearsals will continue through May in preparation for the annual Voices of Now Festival, held on May 15-18, 2019 in Arena Stage's intimate Arlene and Robert Kogod Cradle, a professional theater space. The Jefferson Ensemble will be performing at 7:30 pm on Wednesday, May 15. Following the Festival performances each night, there will be a talkback with audience members to further explore the young artists' process of discerning these questions and their significance to their Southwest community.

Friends of Southwest D.C.'s steadfast commitment to Camp Arena Stage and the Jefferson Ensemble has allowed Arena Stage to positively impact the lives of these Southwest D.C. students. It is extremely rewarding to see the progress these talented artists have made through these artistic education programs. Arena Stage is immensely grateful to the Friends of Southwest D.C. for continuing to support Camp Arena Stage and the Jefferson Ensemble year after year.