

Local students' essays on gun violence win awards, trip to D.C.



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‘Teens today are killing each other left and right; it has to come to an end.’

PITTSBURGH EIGHTH-GRADE STUDENTS JAIA HARRISON AND DEAHMI MOBLEY were named Pittsburgh’s “Do the Write Thing Ambassadors” for 2022, after their essays on the impact of gun violence for young people won top honors. They’re headed to Washington, D.C. this weekend as part of National Recognition Week.

“Sometimes a simple conversation can go a long way.”

Those are the words of Jaia Harrison, an eighth-grade student at Manchester Academic Charter School.

Those words, that simple conversation, she said, can oftentimes be the difference between peace and violence, between life...or death.

Harrison was one of the two winners in the 2022 Pittsburgh “Do the Write Thing Challenge,” an annual essay competition for middle school students. Each student submitted an essay about the impact of violence on their lives, and the essays were judged first by Duquesne University Law School students, and later by Pittsburgh notables such as Steelers head coach Mike Tomlin, Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, retired Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh President and CEO Esther Bush and Highmark Wholecare Vice President Marcia Martin.



DO THE WRITE THING CHALLENGE—Standing, from left: Judges Dwayne D. Woodruff, Kathryn Hens-Greco, Paula A. Cozza; Host, Ryan Houston of WPXI-TV. Seated: Teacher, Ms. Carla Knight and Do the Write Thing Ambassador Jaia Harrison; Teacher, Ms. Leslie Maben and Do the Write Thing Ambassador Deahmi Mobley.

The “Do the Write Thing” initiative is a sanctioned program of the Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas, Family Court Division, co-chaired by Common Pleas Judge Dwayne D. Woodruff and his wife, Joy Maxberry Woodruff. There are similar programs in other cities such as Philadelphia, Detroit, Boston, Chicago and Los Angeles.

Deahmi Mobley, eighth-grader at Pittsburgh King, also on the North Side, was the second winner. Together, Harrison and Mobley are now Pittsburgh’s “Do the Write Thing Ambassadors,” and will travel to Washington, D.C., this weekend (July 15-20), where they will join other “Do the Write Thing Ambassadors” from other cities. It’s part of National Recognition Week, where the student ambassadors will visit the Library of Congress, U.S. Supreme Court and Capitol Hill, among other landmarks. A recognition dinner in D.C. will conclude the trip.

“Recently my parents bought a new house. It’s a beautiful house that looks amazing on the inside, but soon after we moved in, there were many internal problems that couldn’t be seen by just looking at the walls,” Harrison wrote in her essay. “That’s the same thing with mental health. Everyone sees a well-appearing, happy person but no one sees the issues that they’re struggling with internally. If kids just had someone to talk to and share their problems, I believe that youth violence could be majorly lessened. Sometimes a simple conversation can go a long way.”

Sadly, Harrison said that she feels “every kid can say they have come face-to-face with violence in different ways, whether it’s a fight, shooting, bullying or even school threats. Youth violence has been an issue for

many years but over time has progressively gotten worse. Teens today are killing each other left and right; it has to come to an end. Youth violence takes a huge toll on the youth's mental, physical and spiritual health."

But Harrison advises her fellow students to have "an escape" from the seemingly endless drama and violence that surrounds many of today's Black youth. Her personal escape is doing makeup. "It's a way that I could express myself. There are many things that others my age can use as their own personal escape, like drawing, modeling or even sports."

For Mobley, the wise young man often asks, "What happened to this world? How did we become so engrossed by these things?"

He's referring to the "drinking, smoking, parties, doing drugs, and all these adult-like things" that he feels kids in his generation care about. "Even most adults act as if they weren't raised right. I believe this causes them to not be able to teach their own kids to do the right thing. The minds of our generation are changing. The good is bad, and the bad is good. I don't know how that works, but everyone seems to be fine with it."

But for Mobley, he said he's focused on getting an education and being smart, along with staying out of unsafe situations. That, however, is looked down upon by many of his peers.

"We need to do better as a whole," Mobley's essay continued. "Instead of putting others down, we should bring each other up. Instead of balling up a fist, hold someone's hand. Instead of picking up a gun, pick up some books. And watch how society, and us as a community, change."



COMMON PLEAS JUDGE DWAYNE WOODRUFF, WPXI-TV ANCHOR/REPORTER RYAN HOUSTON

"Both Jaia and Deahmi wrote of a personal and tragic life experience that has led them to see life and living from a dreadful and more serious perspective than they had in the past," said Judge Dwayne Woodruff and

Joy Maxberry Woodruff, in a joint statement provided to the New Pittsburgh Courier, July 8. “They are both passionate about violence prevention advocacy and additionally, they were both interviewed, at the courthouse, along with eight other students, and rose to the top by virtue of their ability to verbalize their thoughts, feelings and desire to affect change in their communities.”

Judge Woodruff was joined onstage at the Sheraton Pittsburgh Hotel at Station Square, June 2, by fellow judges such as Kim Berkeley Clark, Tiffany Sizemore and Nicola Henry-Taylor in presenting the awards to the students. The local “Do the Write Thing” Dinner Celebration was hosted by WPXI-TV anchor/reporter Ryan Houston, who was a member of the Courier’s Fab 40 Under 40 for 2022.

“The dinner is always a unique opportunity to bring together students, teachers and parents from across Allegheny County who share in one important and common goal; to end violence,” Joy Maxberry Woodruff said.

Joy Maxberry Woodruff added about the “Do the Write Thing” program: “It gives students the opportunity to participate in classroom discussions on violence and then express their thoughts in writing...It helps the students understand that more violence is never the answer. Many students have expressed that the program has helped them feel hope and start to heal from trauma caused by violence in their young lives.”