

# Camp in the Heights: the summer of a lifetime



Community News

Manhattan Times / Tuesday, September 06, 2011



Fresh Youth Initiatives (FYI) recently celebrated the completion of its summer camp programs, which included different community service components, with a ceremony at the organization's headquarters on West 171st Street. Participants were awarded trophies and gold medals as a sign of recognition and appreciation.

***Story and photos by Gloria Pazmiño***

Summer of service came to an emotional end for the Summer Camp and Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) crews at Fresh Youth Initiative (FYI) on Fri., August 19th.

FYI, the local non-profit organization that has been encouraging and supporting the efforts of young people in Washington Heights and Inwood for the past 18 years, wrapped up their summer program this past week.

It did so by celebrating the efforts of children enrolled in FYI's Summer Camp program, and the work and leadership of the Summer Youth Employment Program workers who chose the site as the place where they would work their summer jobs.

"It was a very lucky year for us. We had great leadership, and all of you were very willing to work for this community," said Executive Director Steve Ramos, as he stood among a circle of about 60 smiling boys and girls who dreaded having to say their goodbyes as the summer came to an end.

The FYI Summer Day Camp offers a gateway experience for participants ages 10 to 13 to take part in hands-on community service activities, outreach, trips, arts and crafts and daily reflection. In addition, FYI employs young participants from the SYEP program ages 14 through 19 through the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). The young workers are expected to work up to twenty hours per week, and to develop a sense of professionalism and on-the-job training.

This summer, the FYI SYEP workers split into four different groups which targeted different areas of community outreach and volunteerism: The Mural Squad, Community Connection, and the Group 'Fab Five' Facilitators. Each group worked with the summer campers to tackle community-oriented missions such as gardening, street beautification, volunteering at the FYI pantry, and creating workshops in health and fitness, financial literacy, and career and college preparation.

"Seeing the expressions on [children's] faces is really priceless. This program is really about teaching them new things and exposing them to experiences they would usually not have access to," said

Jeremiah Roman, Summer Camp and Program Director at FYI.

Roman, who has been working with the summer campers for the past five years, said that this year's summer camp was filled with trips and activities that were new to all the kids.

"We want the kids to know that there's more to the five-block radius world here in Washington Heights. We introduced them to other areas of the City, and [did] things they might not have had a chance to do if they spend the summer sitting at home," he said.

But it was home they returned to, at FYI as they closed out the summer.

After a day of recreational activities at High Bridge Park, the group came back for lunch at the FYI building on West 171st Street between Amsterdam and Audubon Avenues. After a healthy meal and while standing in a "I remember when" circle, both the summer campers and the SYEP workers recounted their favorite memory from the seven-week program. The memories, most of them from a day spent in Luna Park, the amusement park in Coney Island, spoke of new friendships formed, camaraderie, and appreciation for work well done.

The FYI camp participants, many smocked in royal blue t-shirts bearing the FYI logo, showed off their bright gold medals and trophies that were handed out at the ceremony, rewards for a job well done.

"It felt good to help people. I really liked spending my summer here," said Richard Leechong, 17, affectionately called "Fluffy" by everyone in a nod to his curly Afro. Leechong, an energetic leader, was part of the Community Connection group which helped out at the FYI pantry distributing food.

As the ceremony drew to an end, there was not a dry eye in the room. Saying not a final goodbye, but rather a "see-you-next-summer," FYI Executive Director Esteban "Steve" Ramos thanked the summer campers and SYEP summer workers alike.

"The experiences you've shared are what helps you become who you are. Cherish them and continue to show your commitment to this neighborhood," he said.

Ramos was speaking from experience, as he too had come to FYI as a young man, as an intern with the Helping Hands Food Pantry in 1999, and stood today as the organization's Executive Director.

"You've made an impact in the community, and it thanks you," he added, by way of parting. "Let's continue to show everyone that the youth of Washington Heights and Inwood has a bright future destined for success."