

House of Umoja sponsors STEM event

Damon C. Williams Tribune Staff Writer | Posted: Tuesday, October 28, 2014 5:00 am

From interceding in Philadelphia's rampant gang war in the late '60s and early '70s, to pushing educational and cultural forays with an eye toward the future, West Philadelphia-based community organization House of Umoja has done much to champion inner-city causes in its 46 years of existence.

In keeping with its mantra of providing access for at-risk youth, House of Umoja recently introduced more than 100 inner-city youth to the world of aviation via a hands-on event, which featured schoolchildren taking flights in helicopters and receiving a course in the history of African Americans in the field of flight.

Participating students came from Barry Promise Academy, Bluford Charter Elementary, Mastery Charter, Pennsylvania Cyber School, Samuel B. Huey School, Overbrook High School and the Jubilee School.

The House of Umoja sponsored the event as the non-profit continues to celebrate its 46th year.

"We had 122 students there from the surrounding schools and introduced them to aviation, which gave the students a strong orientation in STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] learning," said House of Umoja Director of Community Outreach David Fattah, brother of U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah. "The students went out to a hangar at Northeast Airport, where the kids were able to get into two planes worth more than a million dollars apiece."

House of Umoja worked with aviation education organization AviationEd for the event, which also included the help of Councilman Curtis Jones, Councilwoman Cindy Bass and State Sen. Vincent Hughes.

Three other influential groups — the National Black Coalition of Federal Aviation Employees, Black Pilots Of America and Blacks In Government — also made the event meaningful for the students who attended.

"We had very strong partnerships for the event," said Hand house of Umoja Founder and CEO Queen Mother Falaka Fattah. "It was a tremendous day, and the kids were so excited. It made all the planning and organizing worthwhile."



House of Umoja Community Outreach Director David Fattah.

House of Umoja Community Outreach Director David Fattah. — Photo courtesy NewsWorks

Falaka Fattah, 82, is a veteran at organizing. More than four decades ago, Fattah addressed the rampant gang epidemic of the time by organizing neighborhood and citywide truces between rival gangs and got many gang leaders to sign peace pledges — which are still in effect today.

Of the 105 gangs in Philadelphia in 1974, 80 pledged peace, Falaka Fattah said. This break through came at a gang conference held at 1810 Ridge Ave., which 500 gang members attended. They pledged allegiance to the conference slogan ‘No Gang War In 74.’

Fattah also organized housing and education initiatives for African American youths, and House of Umoja has maintained relevancy by staying at the forefront of issues crucial to the African American existence.

Falaka Fattah, however, doesn’t bask in past glories and accomplishments; she would much rather guide House of Umoja through its 46th year and ensure that the organization remains just as viable as it looks toward its 50th anniversary.

“House of Umoja is transitioning from a residential program, which we had for a number of years, to an education–thruisted organization,” Falaka Fattah said. “We are going to transition the 23 homes we own into a campus.

“We have a strategic plan we are following, and we think it is very important that our young people understand what [academic] opportunities are available to them for the future.”

The House of Umoja is located on 56th and Master streets in West Philadelphia, and over the years, has come to own several houses in an adjacent block. Organizers have embarked upon several community uplifting projects, including the installation of a community garden.

For the campus, Falaka Fattah said an architect recently sat with them to go over plans to convert House of Umoja’s properties into a small replica of an ancient African city. “We’re bringing it right back to education,” Falaka Fattah said.

For its 46th year, House of Umoja has sponsored Earth Day and the Million Father March, an initiative to get all father, African-American ones in particular, to walk with their child on the first day of school and pledge to be more active in their child’s education.

“We started out this year by acknowledging the peace pledge with some of the gang members, many of whom are grandparents now,” Falaka Fattah said. “But House of Umoja has moved on through the years, and we are looking forward to this transition. I don’t want to talk about what we have done, but about what we will do.”