

eliminating racism
empowering women
ywca

Central Carolinas

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yworks

The ABCs of DEI

Sowing the seeds of empathy, respect and understanding

On a sunny March afternoon in YWCA's Sunridge Youth Learning Center, students proudly chanted "I am unique, and that's beautiful," while designing their own distinctive flowers to be planted in the class's "diversity garden." Once complete, the "garden" was full of flowers, all unique in their own individual way. **In an effort to celebrate diversity and impart the importance of equity and inclusion, Community Engagement Manager Jamila Green facilitated a class lesson called "The ABCs of DEI" with Sunridge students.**

In order to further YWCA's mission of eliminating racism and empowering women, it is critical that we sow the seeds of empathy, respect and understanding in our next generation. YWCA's Youth Programs provide free, year-round, out-of-school programming for students from low-income communities in eight Youth Learning Centers across Mecklenburg and Union Counties. In addition to developing their literacy skills, YWCA's Youth Programs students to think critically about the world around them and to develop a holistic sense of self.

So when Jackie Hubbard, assistant coordinator at Park Road Youth Learning Center, had a student ask her about what DEI meant, their confusion around the concepts of equality and differing perspectives sparked an idea to bring these big ideas of diversity, equity and inclusion to their level as elementary schoolers. **"I was thinking, how can we talk about these complex topics differently, and what is 'fair' on a kid's level? How can we help our students understand their own perspectives?" shared Jackie.**

Born out of a desire to equip students with the knowledge and language to understand the world around them, Jamila developed the lesson "The ABCs of DEI" for YWCA's students. The lesson led students through what each term means to them and what it looks like in their lives. To celebrate diversity, students learned how diversity does not only include the physical characteristics they see in themselves and their classmates, but also includes thoughts and beliefs. Together, they repeated the mantra, "I am unique, and that's beautiful," while showing off their own flowers to the class. By together creating a "diversity garden" and seeing uniquely decorated flowers all together, they saw how their own individual identities make them unique in a beautiful way that deserves to be celebrated.



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Latasha's Story

Putting one foot in front of the other

In May 2022, Latasha, a strong mother of five, had run out of options. After her relationship with the father of her five children ended, she was in need of a path forward. She had been living in a housing program with her family, but due to the breakup, she and her children, aged 4 through 21, had to move out. With nowhere else to go, she moved her family into her mother's living room. **She knew she needed to find a path forward, but didn't know where to start.**

After doing some research, Latasha learned about YWCA's Families Together program. Through this program, YWCA provides safe, affordable housing and intensive support services for families with minor children facing homelessness. Immediately, Latasha knew it was a fit. She had her social worker write her a referral, and soon, she and her children were approved. Finally, there was a glimmer of light on their path forward.

When Latasha and her four youngest children moved into one of YWCA's Families Together townhomes, she was overcome with gratitude. "I was grateful that we didn't just have a place to stay, but we had our own kitchen. I had my own bedroom. And YWCA provided everything we needed: bedding, washcloths, towels and more," shared Latasha. Although it had been a difficult period of transition, **"It felt like a step in the right direction — a stepping stone,"** shared Latasha.

Now with a safe roof over their heads, Latasha and her family had the time and energy to set and work towards goals with the help of YWCA's Families Together staff. Latasha wanted to achieve financial stability. She needed to save money, provide support and a stable home for her children. **And most importantly, she needed to secure permanent housing — a safe place for her and her young children to grow together as a family.**



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The journey to financial stability and permanent housing is not an easy one, but with the support of the Families Together program, Latasha kept putting one foot in front of the other by budgeting, taking classes, and navigating affordable housing waitlists. While seeing the finish line was difficult at first, she gained hope and knowledge by celebrating other families in the Families Together program who had graduated into permanent housing. It opened her mind to what was possible for her and her family, even though she had a long road ahead of her to achieving her goals.

After nearly 18 months of hard work and perseverance, Latasha and her children got to experience that same excitement they witnessed in their Families Together neighbors. **They were approved for Section 8 housing, thanks to YWCA’s partnership with Inlivan, and moved out of Families Together this past January — graduating from the program into permanent housing.** “This part felt really far away when I first started the program,” shared Latasha, but thanks to the one-on-one support she received in the program, “I knew it was reachable.”

Now, a few months later, Latasha and her children have settled into their new home. Her children were able to stay in the same school district, able to avoid the uprooting that happens when young students transfer schools. And as Latasha reflects on her journey, she’s looking forward to the future, too. Today, Latasha is working towards bigger goals — like improving her financial stability and her career. She wants to eventually become a social worker or work in the human services field, and to be able to give back and support others who have walked her same path. She was even able to take classes in human services and case management while in YWCA’s program.

“I’ve come so far from my first day when I moved into YWCA. I feel like a different person!”



The future is bright for Latasha and her children, and YWCA is so proud to have played a role in their story. Thank you to YWCA’s generous donors who support our transitional housing programs. Latasha’s story is possible because of you.



Sunridge students learning about equity through an exercise in height differences.



Sunridge's "diversity" garden, complete with flowers designed by each student.

To help students understand the concept of equity, Jamila picked two students, one short and one tall, and held a piece of candy above their heads at a height only the taller student could reach. Students lamented, “that’s not fair!” until Jamila pulled out a stool, which when the shorter student stood on it, brought them to the same height and in comfortable reach of the candy. **Although a second grader can’t quite yet understand the complexities of structural racism in our society, students were able to connect with equity and how it plays into their life. The stool example helped students better understand equity by demonstrating that each person has different circumstances and we may need to allocate resources differently to reach equal outcomes.**

And lastly, to break down “inclusivity” in kid-friendly terms, students took turns reading aloud *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold, a book that celebrates diversity in a school setting where everyone is welcomed with open arms. Inclusivity, as Jamila shared, means making sure there is room for everyone to play, live and exist, where no one feels left out or excluded. All students had the opportunity to contribute, no matter their reading level, making for a fun, interactive read-along experience.

At a time when the words “diversity, equity and inclusion” are divisive, YWCA stands strong in our mission to eliminate racism, empower women and promote peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. As we grapple with these complex terms ourselves as adults in society, it is imperative we help provide the tools for our young students to be well-rounded citizens and critical thinkers. By nurturing empathy and understanding in our youth, we pave the way for a future where everyone is celebrated for who they are, and where equity and inclusion thrive.



Dear YWCA family and friends,

In 1967, the year after YWCA Central Carolinas opened the doors to serve the community at its sparkling new Park Road campus, YWCAs across the nation adopted this one imperative: **“to thrust our collective power toward the elimination of racism wherever it exists and by any means necessary.”** Over the next decade, and under the leadership of such social justice champions as board presidents Lib Harkey and Gretchen Allen, YWCA Central Carolinas proactively turned the mirror on itself, pinpointing aspects of the organization that lacked diversity, equity and inclusion. During this same era, board president Charlotte Watkins worked with Sarah Stevenson to desegregate schools and the PTAs that supported them. **These women blazed trails as they leaned into the work of eliminating racism, shaping both the city of Charlotte and YWCA.**

As we write this letter to you, North Carolina’s public university system, with 16 public universities including the nation’s first public university, is targeting diversity efforts. Corporations are cutting DEI budgets. Colleges are now prohibited from using race as a consideration in admissions.

YWCA is committed to the transformational, critical work of anti-racism. **This transformation can only occur if we all take an honest, clear-eyed look at structural racism, its roots in our country and how, as an ever-present force, it evolves and persists today.**

In this issue, you will read about our community engagement manager, Jamila Green, who is leading developmentally-appropriate lessons with our elementary-aged students on “The ABCs of DEI.” Concepts such as “equity” and “inclusion” are complex notions and require critical thinking. With simple exercises, our students see how differences (like height!) can create barriers to participation and why we have to ensure all people get access to the same opportunities. We are proud that our young students are continuing this essential work that has fueled YWCA’s mission for decades.

In solidarity,

Brittany Conner
Board President

Kirsten D. Sikkelee
Chief Executive Officer

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