

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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African American culture class saving and changing lives of Roanoke youth

By Emma Coleman

An African American culture class that has been changing the lives of Roanoke youth in city schools is now available to the public.

The class, titled African American Culture and Contemporary Issues (AACCI) and run by [Total Action for Progress](#) (TAP), was introduced in 2008 to keep Black young men from dropping out of high school.

Mack Malloy, 19, of Roanoke took the class for the first time as a sophomore at William Fleming High School. He enjoyed it, and signed up for it again as a junior and as a senior.

During his senior year, he was injured in a shooting. On his hospital bed, he made a decision.

“I’ve been misled. I’ve been shot. I’ve been in gangs. I’ve been in blood. I did all that stuff,” Malloy said recently. “For me to make it out of that, it was kind of like a gift.”

The lessons taught by the AACCI class have helped Malloy toward becoming mindful and self-disciplined — qualities he always wanted to possess.

“I always wanted to be a leader, but not in that type of way,” Malloy said. “It’s me versus me all the time. I never realized that. But I realized that night it was me versus me. I had never owned up to myself that I was hard-headed. I didn’t want to listen, but I owned up to it. It kind of brings peace to my heart, too, that I let that go.”

Lateefah Trent, TAP’s youth services and education manager, said students often drop out of school because they don’t believe they’ll live to see adulthood.

“They don’t feel like they’re going to really live past age of 21 or 25, or that they’re not going to amount anything, so ‘What’s the point?’” Trent said.

But the AACCI class teaches youth that their lives and other people’s lives have value, giving them “a sense of pride.”

“The culture has gone through so much of society saying, ‘You’re not worthy,’ Trent said.

“You *are* worthy. You *are* important. Everybody has a purpose, and everybody has gifts. How do you want to utilize yours and contribute to your community, to better your life and become the best you can be? That’s a lot of what the class offers.”

Malloy said he didn’t always enjoy school, but he liked the AACCI class, and his interest in it has rubbed off on his peers.

“I had hard times myself going into class and sitting down. If they see me, it’s like a bigger picture for them to sit down, too. Like, ‘I seen him do crazy things. For him to sit right here, it must really be entertaining. It must be something he really likes,’” Malloy said. “It’s really good. It’s not really that bad. Just got to pay attention. That’s it.”

In January 2019, the AACCI class at William Fleming had about 25 students. About two years later, in the fall of 2021, around 70 had enrolled in the course.

The 2021-22 school year was the first that the class was offered to both males and females. One class remained for males only, while a second class was “mixed,” Trent said. “It’s become very popular in that aspect.”

Currently, about 75 students are enrolled in the course at William Fleming. As interest spread through the school, it began known to students’ families, too.

“We’ve had several parents and people in the community say, ‘Hey, I heard about my child or grandchild in this class. This seems very interesting. Is there something like that for us to go to?’” Trent relayed. “That’s how we came about with the community one that we’re having on Saturdays.”

When TAP received a grant from Roanoke’s Gun Violence Prevention Commission in May, it decided to use some funds to extend the course offering for youths’ parents and community members, ages 15 and up.

The [new public class](#) started meeting at the Roanoke Higher Education Center (RHEC) on North Jefferson Street Sept. 17. It convenes at 11 a.m. on Saturdays, and registration is free. Just send an email to lateefah.trent@tapintohope.org to sign up.

“We have had up to about eight individuals from the community come,” Trent said. “The biggest thing that we love about this is that it’s allowing different ages, across all spectrums, to come together and learn about the African American culture and the history of it as a group, as a team, to build community awareness.”

Current students will complete the course at the end of this academic school year in spring 2023.

Antonio Stovall, who works for the city as a member of the Youth and Gang Violence Prevention Team, instructs the class both at William Fleming High School and the RHEC.

“He takes African American history and teaches it in more of an empowering way, versus the traditional way that we would learn about it,” Trent said.

Malloy, having graduated from high school earlier this, is taking the class with Stovall for the fourth time at the RHEC.

“He can still be a part of the class and still build those types of relationships and network with other people and have a space to have positive and uplifting conversations,” Stovall said.

Trent said the class examines topics beyond typical lessons about slavery and the civil rights movement, surveying “who we are as a people, where we’ve been, where we can go.”

“It’s been very impactful to see, especially youth, go from hearing about just slavery, hangings and cotton fields to actual, ‘Oh, this person was a doctor. This person was an inventor. This person did this. Oh, this person learned these techniques and brought these things to the table,’” Trent said. “There are a lot of things that’s not taught, but it’s taught on a different level.”

Malloy said he most enjoys learning about ancient African history and culture.

“I got really deep into that,” Malloy said. “How they eat, how they move around, the things they used to wear back then, all that good stuff.”

The teen said he applies lessons about nutrition to his daily routine.

“I started eating healthy after my 10th grade year to see how it would change me as a person. It changed me a lot. I have not even lost any weight,” he laughed. “For some reason, I got bigger. I got to buy some more pants.”

The class also discusses current events and contemporary issues, from popular rap music artists to recent acts of gun and gang violence.

“We talk about the importance brotherhood, friendships, understanding the importance of knowing the difference between a friend and a partner in crime,” Stovall said. “When you have friends, you want to make sure that you’re holding your friends accountable, and your friends are holding you accountable.”

Stovall also teaches meditation and mindfulness techniques to his students.

“We do an exercise called analytical meditation, where I show them an image, or I may show them a quote, and we take the time to break down the image. They share their perspective on what they see, and I share my perspective on what I see,” Stovall said. “That right there really starts to leave an imprint on their consciousness, and they can learn better that way.”

Trent said the class also features, “open dialogue discussions,” and debates, “so that people can understand it’s okay to have different opinions, and respect the other person’s opinion, and be able to do it in a healthy manner.” She said because of Stovall’s unique approach, he “doesn’t come off as a teacher.”

“It has made a world of difference, especially with the population that he had been working with,” Trent said. “We’ve had individuals admit that they were on the verge of killing someone else, or committing suicide, and mind states have changed because of the class.”

Trent said that at the end of the 2021-22 school year, about 98% of students taking the AACCI course at William Fleming moved on to the next level in their education experience. She hopes graduates of the RHEC class will spread a culture of self-awareness to the community.

“When you’re more confident in yourself, you’re able to handle your emotions better, you’re able to respond better, and to take pride in your actions better, which in the long run, reduces violence, whether it’s domestic violence, gun violence, or just normal fights,” Trent said.

Trent said organizations like TAP feel considerable pressure to reach and impact the lives of youth, but “the kids learned it from somewhere.”

“It’s not just the kids that always need to be reached,” Trent said. “So, who are these positive adults that we can reach to help reach any and everybody in the community? Who would be a good role model? Who is somebody in the community that other people actually listen to? We’re trying to get them to be incorporated into some of these classes to help go and spread that.”

Malloy said the elementary and middle schoolers that live in his neighborhood now look up to him and listen to his advice.

“Sometimes in the summertime, they’d be outside late at night. I’d be outside, too. But I don’t like to be outside like that, late at night. When I see them, I quickly tell them to go inside,” the teen said. “God forbid anything happen to them. I don’t want them out there like that, because I care about them. And I know that their parents do, too.”

The teen tries to teach his friends self-discipline, a trait that he has learned by meditating.

“I had one friend that called me like, ‘Man, I meditated for the first time. It felt good.’ He said, ‘It felt weird,’ because to train your body like that, you got to have the will and the power to tell your body to just stay still. A lot of kids have a hard time with it. It took me, my body, a long time just to sit still,” Malloy said. “So, I told him, ‘Just have the patience.’ Patience is the key.”

Since graduation, Malloy has landed his first job, and he’s working on submitting college applications with plans to become a mechanic.

Malloy was born in New York City and raised by his aunt, Tinye “Janice” Laing, whom he calls “Mom.” He wouldn’t be where he is without her guidance.

“She always wanted to keep me safe, but my mentality was that I didn’t understand how precious I was to her until I seen her cry almost on my deathbed,” he said. “To see in her eyes that she wanted me to be healthy at that moment, it was just like a motivation. I told her, ‘When I get well, you don’t have to worry about me doing that again.’”

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Boxing ring a safe spot for at-risk youth

By Emma Coleman

Champs Gym in southeast Roanoke prides itself in keeping at-risk youth off city streets and out of trouble through boxing. But maintaining the building and its services is expensive, and families that the gym supports can’t support the facility.

“We don’t get any money coming in. We have a PayPal and stuff like that for donations. We just have so many kids,” Latorie Woodberry said. “It’s important, and we have to find a way to fund it.”

Woodberry is himself an ex-fighter who works part-time as an electrical contractor. He owns Boxing and Brawling LLC, the business that operates a youth boxing program — call Boxfit — at the gym on Jamison Avenue.

But the business isn’t profitable, and while he should charge Boxfit participants the \$65 entry fee for his services, Woodberry doesn’t.

“I can’t,” he said. “I can’t charge kids. There’s no way you can write a contract with somebody that’s under 17 or 18 years old.”

Woodberry said only about five parents regularly contribute to the cost of their child’s participation.

“I got 26 kids enrolled now,” Woodberry said. “I got maybe two parents that pay the term fee. But it’s just more of like, ‘Hey, paying a tip to the coach.’ It’s kind of leaving me in a bind, because the insurance on the gym is like \$350 a month.”

Woodberry’s business began as a summer camp in 2018.

“Then it just overlapped into two summer camps. Then COVID hit, and we went year-round, did a little bit of online studying with the weight room. Then we just keep on rotating,” Woodberry said. “We rotate kids in and out from ages seven to 17 all year, like about 65 kids a year.”

The Boxfit program is about four months long. Once participants graduate, they return to the gym as mentors and help Woodberry and other coaches with training new pugilists.

“They just kind of feed these guys, and keep them in line, and help me out around here,” Woodberry said.

Quan Fuell, 16, began his Boxfit journey earlier this year and now works as a mentor. He said the program helped him focus.

“It really helped me with my school, helped me with a lot of stress, a lot of things that I’ve been going through personally,” he said.

During a tournament at the gym in May, high school sophomore Fuell sported an ankle monitor in addition to boxing gloves.

“That’s really why I started the program,” Fuell said. “Once you get that ankle monitor on, you can’t leave the house. You can’t do nothing. And being the house all day, you get bored. I’d be in the house, gaining weight, with nothing to show for it. So, I started the program.”

Fuell participated for fun at first. Now, he trains with a new goal in mind.

“It really changed me and what I wanted my dream to be,” Fuell said. “I used to want to be a football player, but then, as I got in the ring, I was like, ‘Oh, yeah, I’m trying to be like Mike Tyson, Muhammed Ali, or Sonny.’ I’m trying to be one of the best. Hopefully, I’ll become a pro boxer by my senior year.”

Fuell said that while the gym is fun, it plays a role in keeping kids safe.

“It helps some of the kids with teamwork, helps some kids with their social anxiety,” Fuell said. “But for the most part, it’s to keep them out of trouble, so they don’t get in trouble somewhere else.”

Woodberry said most program participants are “juvenile offenders” that come to Champs Gym from Blue Ridge Behavioral Healthcare, the Family Service of Roanoke Valley and juvenile corrections facilities.

“Probably about 80% of them,” Woodberry said. “A couple of them are on house arrest or restriction or some kind of supervision.”

The boxing coach said one 14-year-old boy was introduced to BoxFit after his mother died.

“He just shut down. No sleeping, no eating, no talking. When I first met him, he was in the car. He was like pale, like a vampire or ghost or something. He wouldn’t get out the car,” Woodberry said.

The coach talked the boy out of the vehicle and into BoxFit. He participated in the program for two months.

“He wasn’t really into boxing, but we broke him out of his shell,” Woodberry said. “He just felt so comfortable with us. He was ready for placement, by that time, to be placed with another family.”

Woodberry said the community needs programs like the ones he offers at Champs to promote wellness.

“There’s a lot of problems. We have no good debt relief programs or rent relief programs, and you can see that stress transforming to the kids,” Woodberry said. “I just feel like we need a stress relief program, definitely throughout the city, even if it’s not funding BoxFit.”

Woodberry submitted an application for grant funds from Roanoke’s Gun Violence Prevention Commission (GVPC) to host a series of “field days” designed to promote “community unity through physical fitness.

The program’s flyer said the field days would feature games, food, music, a relay race and prizes. Woodberry said the program would have run from July 20 through Aug. 20.

“Getting everybody out, getting their blood circulating, having an open dialogue about what we can do to prevent gun crime and what we need in our community,” Woodberry said, “I think it would have been a good thing to set the energy.”

When the GVPC announced mini-grant recipients in May, Boxing and Brawling LLC was on the list. But Woodberry said that because the business isn’t a nonprofit, it never received any funds.

“They obviously liked the initiative, and then we got knocked down and we got denied funding because we’re not a 501©(3), and somewhere in the fine print, you got to be a 501©(3) to receive grant funds,” Woodberry said. “It was just like a big failure, but I’m reaching out to different organizations now, trying to get funding to do to the initiative, because my kids are pumped up about doing it now.”

Woodberry said he also needs funds to improve the conditions of the gym, an old firehouse that Woodberry said is “falling apart.”

“There used to be two fire engines in here,” Woodberry said. “It kind of fell into our hands, and we’re making the best of it.”

Still, Woodberry believes the gym is a safe space for community youth.

“A lot of kids catch the bus and walk. They just want to be in my gym, because it’s a place that they can come eat, talk to their friends, they get to come work out, work through their problems. It’s somewhere they feel comfortable,” Woodberry said.

The gym provides a free lunch and snack program for participants, too.

“I used to have the internet there for them,” the coach said. “Me being a kid from the same kind of circumstance, I just want to be able to come back to my community and provide this kind of situation.”

Woodberry said he also spent time in group homes, foster homes and jail before becoming a boxer. He said he pours a lot of time into BoxFit because he understands the difficulties his students are facing.

“Boxing saved my life,” Woodberry said. “Just finding a home in the ring and being at peace, being able to earn some money not illegally, being able to put food on the table, feed my family, take care of my babies. I think that just allowed me to stand up more as a man and give myself confidence not to be like a criminal.”

“It just means so much to me,” Woodberry continued, “because I want to be able to give that opportunity to somebody else that might be lost, trying to figure out their way. It might not be your way, but this will give you the discipline to find your way.”

Woodberry recently launched a campaign that allows interested individuals to sponsor a youth’s BoxFit experience.

“My idea is to get a lot of people to give a little,” Woodberry said. “My program, every three months, it’s about \$6,000 in order to run it. If we get, let’s just say 100 citizens, to donate \$65, then I’m funded for the summer.”

Anyone interested in sponsoring a child’s BoxFit experience can submit funds through PayPal or through CashApp using the tag “\$BoxingandBrawling.”

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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All Hollins volunteers suspended

By Emma Coleman

All volunteers at the Hollins Volunteer Fire Department and Rescue Squad have been suspended pending an investigation into possible embezzlement.

The county’s fire and rescue department, police department and internal auditor were made aware of concerns involving the operations of the Hollins station, Roanoke County announced Friday.

The police department and internal auditor have launched an investigation “that will be extensive due to the nature of the offense,” the news release said. “As these will be prolonged investigations, additional information will not be available in the near future.”

Public Information Officer Amy Whittaker said the focus of the investigation is on the Hollins volunteer organization, not career staff members of the Roanoke County department.

“We don’t want citizens to become alarmed and think that there will be an interruption in service,” Whittaker said in an email.

The county said the Hollins stations’ response to calls for service has been minimal in recent years. Career personnel have “for approximately 20 years provided 24-hour ambulance coverage and 24-hour fire coverage,” the news release concluded.

A search warrant certified in Roanoke Circuit Court on July 18 indicates police are investigating Rescue Chief Jeff Edwards.

“He had been purchasing a large amount of food and there were numerous other charges that were unexplained and unapproved by the board,” the affidavit included in the search warrant said. “One of the receipts that he turned in as a crew meal appeared to be a lunch purchased for he and his girlfriend.”

The filed warrant requested approval to search Edward’s girlfriend’s residence for “items belonging to Roanoke County Volunteer Fire and Rescue Squad Hollins #5.”

The search warrant requests permission to seize items including banking documents, shipping documents, receipts, data from Edwards’ cellphone and keys to a 2012 Dodge Durango registered the Hollins fire and rescue squad.

The Roanoke County Police Department first became aware of Edward’s purchasing activity July 1, when it was reported, the affidavit said.

On June 27 by email, and on June 30 and July 11 in person, Edwards was asked to turn over the Durango, the bank cards for the accounts held by the Hollins station, post office box keys and safety deposit keys. His deadline was July 15.

“The first notification on June 27 advised that there were to be no further purchases made whatsoever, so that the accounts could be brought up to date and delinquent bills could be paid,” the affidavit said.

When the affidavit was submitted for court approval in mid-July, none of the requested items had been returned by Edwards.

“He continues to make purchases that appear personal in nature due to the dollar amounts and the fact there are purchases on days he is not acting in his official capacity,” the affidavit said.

Investigators have accessed and reviewed records connected to the Hollins stations’ bank account between 2020 and 2022.

“In 2021 a minimal number of receipts were turned in as compared to 2020 records,” the affidavit said. “In 2022 there were some receipts turned in January and February. Numerous receipts since February 2022 have not been turned in.”

Police said receipts have been requested from Edwards several times, “however, he will not provide them,” the affidavit said.

It is not clear whether Edwards has turned over the items requested by law enforcement since the search warrant was filed.

Search warrants related to the embezzlement investigation have also been filed in Roanoke County and Salem Circuit courts, but they are either sealed or have not yet been accessed.