



Harris County Juvenile Probation Department

Strengthening Our Communities by Engaging Youth and Families

| The Impact of Connection



When students at the Excel Academy Charter School (which serves the residential facilities division of the Harris County Juvenile Probation Department) attended a Leadership Day at the Holocaust Museum Houston, they walked away from that experience with a lot more to think about than when they walked in.



Several students expressed how their experience touring the museum helped them develop a deeper understanding of who they were and where they came from.

Sofia Adrogué, with Excel Academy Charter School students.

For many of the young people in attendance that day, the outing on October 7, 2021, was their first educational field trip, and for others their first visit to a museum, especially one like the Holocaust Museum Houston.

“The 2021 Leadership Day was born from the idea of a classic field trip but quickly evolved into a more meaningful and impactful experience for the attending students,” said Henry Gonzales, Executive Director of Harris County Juvenile Probation Department (HCJPD.) “Our goal was



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to provide the students with an opportunity to identify with and connect to something greater than themselves. Through choice of venue, the addition of a leadership panel, an incredible museum staff, and through the support of our partnerships with Sofia Adrogué, Dr. Kelly J. Zuñiga, and Dr. Michelle Tovar, our 2021 Leadership Day accomplished that goal and more.”

In recognition of Hispanic Heritage Month, the students took a journey through a special exhibit titled, *Withstand: Latinx Art in Times of Conflict*, which explored themes of social justice, gender roles, domestic violence, the immigrant experience, and social and political turmoil, themes many of them as young people could relate to and identify with. Featured were curators Gabriela Magana and Rosa Ana Orlando who spent much of the day with the students explaining and discussing all aspects of the *Withstand* exhibit.



Additionally, the students met and interacted with a diverse panel of guest speakers, Assistant Chiefs Patricia Yvette Cantu and Chandra Hatcher of the Houston Police Department, Mr. Karlton Harris, who turned his life around after his experience with the justice system, and Mr. Kerry Max Cook, a former death row inmate who was released in 1999 from Texas Death Row after twenty-two years wrongly convicted and imprisoned.

Henry Gonzales, with the 2021 Leadership Day guest speaker panel.

Meeting and interacting with the panel afforded the students an opportunity to identify with the lived experiences and hardships of others.

“The panel of guest speakers was particularly impactful to our students,” said Dr. Michelle Blount, a Casework Supervisor at Harris County Leadership Academy. “They interacted intently with the guest speakers and responded well to the fact that the panel was composed of people who looked like them and had shared, lived experiences.”

By reflecting on the exhibits, many of the Excel Academy students connected with the idea that they themselves survived traumatic experiences and began to understand and process the idea that those experiences didn’t define who they are now or who they will become as they grow into adulthood.

Dr. Diana Quintana, Assistant Executive Director, HCJPD shared a personal experience with one of the students who, upon connecting with an exhibit in the museum related to holocaust



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survivors, expressed that he too was a survivor. “He had a moment,” said Dr. Quintana, “where he showed real vulnerability and empathy and identified in a personal way with the suffering of those who survived a horrible thing.”

Many of the students expressed interest in returning to the museum after graduating from their respective programs and a desire for their families to accompany them for the purpose of a shared experience.

Several students expressed how their experience touring the museum and interacting with the panel helped them develop a deeper understanding of who they were and where they came from, while others talked about a more direct experience related to the museum exhibits, like the sobering impact of walking through a rail car in which holocaust victims were taken to the camps, only to realize later in the tour, after seeing hundreds of small shoes on exhibit, that so many of the victims packed into those rail cars were young children, presumably close to their own age.

Such were the thoughts and contemplations of the Excel Academy Charter School students as expressed to their teachers, therapists, caseworkers, and youth development coaches – the sobering impact of the suffering of another, the connection that comes from realizing they aren’t alone in facing hardships, that not only can they survive the traumatic experiences they’ve been through but thrive despite and because of them, and that who they are now is worth fighting for to become who they have the potential to be.