

## THE CULTURAL ARTS COALITION'S ENVIRONMENTAL AMBASSADORS COLLABORATE WITH GROUPS AROUND THE COMMUNITY

For those who've had a shortage of uplifting news lately, this story is for you.

If you don't know of the Cultural Arts Coalition, you've been missing out on a whole lotta good news about dedicated youth and hope for the future. Co-founder and Executive Director, NKwanda Jah, is a dynamo who collects children under her wings and lets them know this beautiful world is full of wonder just waiting for them to find their niche.

The Cultural Arts Coalition (CAC) was founded in 1983 and is housed at the Wilhelmina Johnson Resource Center. The CAC collaborates with the City of Gainesville and Alachua County, UF and Santa Fe College, and community groups and businesses, to put on the annual 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Arts Festival, which will be held April 25-26, 2022, so mark your calendar. What started as a small, local event more than 40 years ago years ago continued to grow, and hosted 20,000 visitors in its most outstanding year. The CAC even holds a spot in the Library of Congress and is listed in the Florida Black Heritage Trails.



In 2020, the CAC obtained what has now been transformed into the Science Bus. It travels to schools and community locales where the Science Club shares experiments and exhibits, and offers a microscopic view of things. The STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) project has the students examining the requirements and impacts of being human on a fragile planet with essential finite resources. Too few humans

understand how matter cycles and energy flows, even though it's basic ecology. The Science Club wants to change that by making science fun.



Partnering with Children's Trust of Alachua County and others for funding, the CAC marks the 32<sup>nd</sup> year of engaging Environmental Ambassadors, ages 15-18, who set out on a summer of listening, learning and sharing, as true ambassadors do, with other community groups. But the program is much more than a summer camp. These young people are on a mission.

### How Things Work

The group had a session with representatives from Florida Power and Light to learn how industrial power gets generated and distributed to our homes and they visited a solar farm to find out about alternative sources of energy.



Siembra Farm offered a day of working in the gardens learning about regenerative agriculture, turning the compost pile, and enjoying fresh organic produce. Another day was spent learning about grazing rotation and other ranching activities at third generation Butler Cattle Ranch.

## Water, Water Everywhere



To better understand Florida's precious water the group went swimming down the Itchetucknee River, boating on the Silver River where they counted 100 turtles sunbathing, kayaking on the Matanzas with Sierra Club, and swimming at Butler Beach, developed by Black entrepreneur, Frank Butler, as a resort to be enjoyed by African Americans prior to integration.

The Environmental Protection Dept. led the environmental stewards on a tour of local neighborhood creeks to investigate the flow patterns from Sweetwater Branch, then Duckpond area and Depot Park (a former brownfield), ultimately connecting to Paynes Prairie to recharge our precious Floridan aquifer.

## What a Waste

But, it wasn't all sweet water and salty sea. There was a reality tour of the Leveda Brown Transfer Station to see where all of our trash, recycling, and toxic waste is collected and sorted before being sent "away" to a landfill, recycled, or specially treated as toxic waste.

And, speaking of reducing the waste stream, a tour of the Repurpose Project showed how everything from corks to architectural oddities can be saved from a landfill and turned into something useful or artful.



## Planning for the Future

Using notes from their journals and calling on their experiences, the Ambassadors got together with Young Leaders of Wild Florida for a shared roundtable discussion of the most pressing environmental issues and actions the youth can take to make a better future. The Environmental Ambassadors program teaches job skills, teamwork, and community service while exposing the youth to sustainable employment options. It seems like our role as elders might be to hear their vision of the world they want to live in and help them usher it in.

Before wrapping up the summer's activities with a final ceremony, the Ambassadors made a heartfelt gesture of putting together "love bags" for 50 people who found themselves without a home or access to basic needs. No judgment; just kindness. Some of these young people come from difficult circumstances themselves, and show empathy beyond their years.

It's easy for us oldies but goodies to think that the worst we see of our young people represents most. That isn't so. Perhaps we just don't get enough of young folks in our lives today, or don't pay close enough attention to them, to realize their creative vision for tomorrow. If that's the case, then get out of your seat and lend a hand.

For the Environmental Ambassadors from the Cultural Arts Coalition, their greatest work of art is the way they live their lives each and every day. And, that's a beautiful picture of tomorrow.