Immigrant youth summit forges new connections

By ELIZA DEWEY

When Mohamed Abdi, a high school junior from Dorchester, first came to the United States from Somalia two years ago, he had a rough introduction to his new homeland. Not long after arriving in what was supposed to be a place of promise, his mother fell sick and was unable to work. His family was homeless for three months, teaching him a difficult lesson about his newly adopted country.

"I went to a shelter in Marlborough," Abdi says. "Back home, I never thought about what color I was. But when I went to Marlborough, I felt like I was a different person. People look at you. You can tell it's on their mind."

Mohammed was one of several youth leaders who helped plan an immigrant youth summit that took place on Saturday at the Margarita Muniz Academy in Jamaica Plain. The second annual all-day affair brought together about 40 young people from across the city, representing the Latino, Asian, African and other immigrant populations of Boston.

Sagal Mohamed of ACEDONE and Patricia Gonzalez and Lauris Baz of CSIO, three of the youth organizers who planned the second annual Youth Immigration Summit at Margarita Muniz Academy in Jamaica Plain
Some of organizations behind the effort – the Roxbury-based African Community Economic Development of New England, the East Boston Ecumenical Community Council, and the Center to Support Immigrant Organizing – together form the Immigrant Youth Leadership Network, which meets regularly to help bring together diverse immigrant communities.

"The network's plan is to eradicate poverty," said youth leader Sagal Mohamed, a 10th grader from Roxbury who was one of the lead organizers for the event. "For this summit, we tackled youth leadership and things that affected us. We wanted to build solid relationships across groups. We're here for each other – even though we come from different cultures."

"We face the same problems," added Patricia Gonzalez, an eleventh grader from Dorchester. "We're sparking the idea. We can do something together."

Saturday's events focused on a range of topics that immigrant youth said most closely affected them: youth violence, police brutality and displacement of immigrant communities as Boston spurs ever-new development projects.

A presentation from youth organizers with the Chinese Progressive Association highlighted the concerns that many have about the fate of their communities.

"The community is made up of mostly low-income immigrants," said John Wang in a presentation on Chinatown. "It's rich in Chinese culture. When luxury development comes in, the immigrants get pushed out."

"Chinatown is not just restaurants and a McDonald's with Chinese characters on the outside," added Kim Situ, a youth coordinator with CPA. "Chinatown is a community of real people... without that, it's a façade."

The CPA presenters said that one of their most recent successes was to secure a high number of jobs for local and minority residents at the new Whole Foods that straddles Chinatown and the South End. They said they loosely followed the model of Boston's development policy, which has mandated requirements for the number of construction jobs that must be allocated to Boston residents, women, and people of color. They also obtained the support of Councilor Ayanna Pressley and Boston's Office of Economic Development. The groups behind the CPA-led push announced in January that 64 percent of new hires at the store were residents of Boston and 75 percent were people of color, including 26 percent Asian American.

The program featured a musical performance and a workshop from local artist Toussaint the Liberator. He had praises for organizers from Chinatown who have been outspoken on the Black Lives Matter movement. The CPA has been vocal in their call for police reform and explicit about the need to address police violence against black civilians in particular.

"I know that people change [the phrase] and say 'All Lives Matter,'" he said. "But I really appreciate the fact that you all kept 'Black Lives Matter' intact."

The issue of immigration status, although not a major focus on Saturday, did come up as a tie-in to the larger concerns about young peoples' long-term opportunities. Representatives from an EBECCE summer college prep program called Escalera told attendees not to cut themselves short based on false information about their options.

"Some people do not have documents, so they think they can't go to college," said Alfonso Ceciliano, one of the leaders of the Escalera program. "There are resources, and we're here to help you."

Programs like the one on Saturday have been an important resource in Mohammed's life. He said it was by attending youth programs like Roxbury-based ACE-DONE and Global Potential that he gained a sense of confidence in the face of the difficulties he faced as a new American.

"I like how they bring people together," he said. "I saw someone like me facilitate a workshop, so that showed me I could do it too."

The groups from Saturday's summit are gearing up now for their youth summer leadership programs. If you are interested in learning more, please contact Kevin Whalen at the Center to Support Immigrant Organizing, 617-742-5165.

To apply for the Escalera program or participate in EBECCE's summer soccer league, call Alfonso Ceciliano at 617-667-2750.