



THE VALUE OF LISTENING

A summary of a Day of Listening with Spartanburg's young women of color



Why We Listen

When a child is very young, adults wait in anticipation to listen for the child's first words. Ironically, that same voice can later become unheard, as adults sometimes have the tendency to lose sight of the value of a young person's words.

In the spirit of empowering the voice of today's youth, the Mary Black Foundation's Adolescent Health Initiative, Connect, a Tier 1B Grantee for the Office of Population Affairs (OPA), has embraced effective listening as a way for adults in Spartanburg County to examine and challenge the information they hear in order to improve the quality of life for youth in Spartanburg County.



A Day of Listening to Young Women of Color in Spartanburg

As part of the Connect initiative, Bloom Upstate and the City of Spartanburg Parks and Recreation Department held a Day of Listening on May 5, 2019. The event, My Voice Matters, was designed to provide a safe space for Young Women of Color (YWOC) ages 15-19, and to increase:

- ☐ Opportunities for YWOC living in Spartanburg County to have their voices heard and share their stories;
- ☐ Understanding of the needs of older YWOC;
- ☐ Community initiatives that understand YWOC experiences in Spartanburg; and
- ☐ Understanding of what YWOC want from their community.

The event planning committee, consisting of local youth serving partners and teens in Spartanburg, developed three overarching questions that would guide the discussion.

- ☐ What is life like for you as a YWOC in Spartanburg?
- ☐ Tell us how Spartanburg is or is not supporting you as a YWOC in being the woman you want to be.
- ☐ Tell us how Spartanburg could be a better place for YWOC.

The Day of Listening was designed to be very interactive, with the kick-off being a short-documentary video of YWOC sharing their lived experiences.



The guiding questions were asked during three separate activities including (1) round-table discussion (2) interactive dialogue while jewelry-making, and (3) creative expression through drawing or writing.

YWOC were trained as listeners and facilitated all dialogue for the day; this enhanced the peer-to-peer listening experience.



What We Heard

There were many eye-opening, insightful, and thought provoking statements heard throughout the Day of Listening:

"The community expects us to fail."

"Stop being judgmental, and start being encouraging."

"Your name is difficult to pronounce, can I call you something else?"

"Not all Spanish speaking people are Mexican."

As the sampling of quotes from the attendees demonstrates many YWOC expressed that they do not feel fully supported by the Spartanburg community.

Participants expressed the longing for an environment that does not make them feel ashamed or uncomfortable about who they are, whether it be physical appearance or scholastic ability. For example, attendees reported facing stereotypes that assume YWOC should dress or speak a certain way. Some also described situations where teachers seemed to show "surprise" when students of color were in advanced level classes, while at the same time feeling that teachers and other adults hold students of color to higher standards than white students.

These stereotypes because of race and culture cause them to often feel a sense of isolation and lowered self-esteem.



"Don't let statistics define us."

"I am my own person. I am not like something you can put in a box."



Attendees expressed the need to feel empowered to make their voices heard, whether via social media or in-person, versus feeling fearful that there will be ramifications for doing so. They also identified a need to learn more about how to make their voices heard as it relates to speaking up for their communities, and for help in connecting them with community resources.







Participants desired to see the Spartanburg community do more to embrace people of color by having more frequent cultural events, restaurants, and consistent safe spaces to be with other women of color. Attendees referenced the need for a better understanding of cultural diversity among adults in Spartanburg. They expressed a desire to see more leadership of color both in the school setting and the Spartanburg community at large. These leaders could serve as inspiration and change agents for people of color.

"You are enough."

Call to Action & Recommendations for Community Partners

“Our future is confidence and self-esteem”

It is the hope of Connect, and the community partners involved, that the Day of Listening will inspire others to provide a platform for YWOC in Spartanburg and serve as a Call to Action for community partners. Below are recommendations for how the Spartanburg community can help make Spartanburg a healthier, happier place for its YWOC:

-  Convene community partners that serve youth to discuss findings from the Day of Listening event and action steps partners can take.
-  Offer annual implicit bias and cultural diversity trainings for adults who work with youth, including school administrators, teachers, and community-based organizations.
-  Encourage school districts to review policies and ensure they are applied in an equitable and culturally appropriate way.
-  Create more opportunities for adults (i.e. youth service providers, school administrators, and teachers) to listen to and learn from youth.
-  Create safe spaces for YWOC to continue these conversations with each other.
-  Increase engagement in and support for Sister Support Network, a network of adult women of color in Spartanburg interested in serving as mentors to YWOC (created as part of YWOC Day of Listening event).

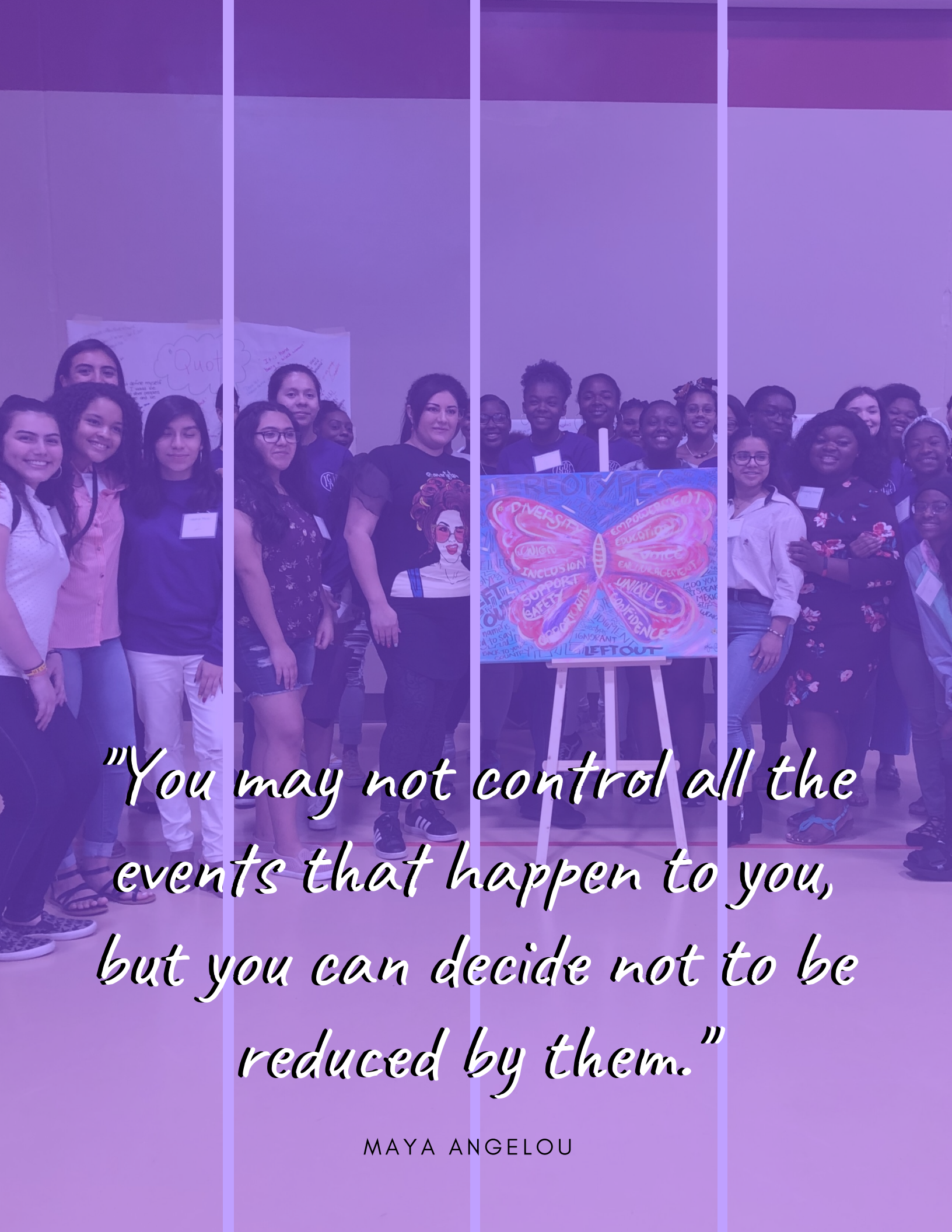
Special Thanks

YWOC Day of Listening Event Committee

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*"You may not control all the
events that happen to you,
but you can decide not to be
reduced by them."*

MAYA ANGELOU