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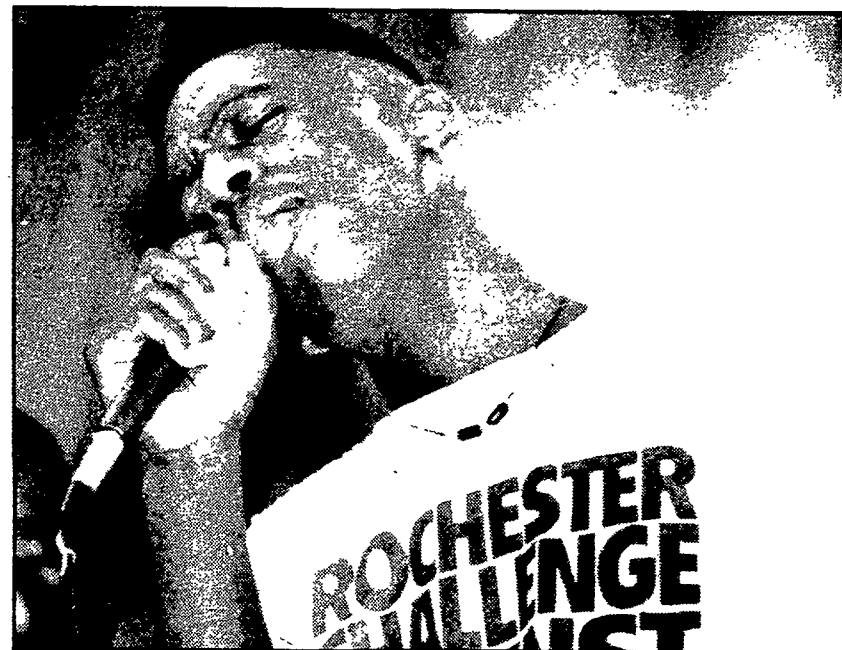
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S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer
Yalonda Trammell (left) portrays Cain and Sharonda Thomas depicts God in a sketch of the Bible story Cain and Abel. (Above) Lotan Floyd sings a solo during the concluding gathering of students at a four-day symposium on violence-related topics sponsored by 'Rochester Challenge Against Violence' and hosted by the Colgate Rochester Divinity School's National Resource Center for the development of Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition.

Youth spirit soars during anti-violence program

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

ROCHESTER - The muggy auditorium was downright oppressive on this sticky, 90-degree day, but nobody seemed to be in any great hurry to leave.

Donning sweat-soaked T-shirts proclaiming "Rochester Challenge Against Violence," approximately 40 youths and adult counselors bade farewell with hugs and smiles as a four-day symposium concluded last Friday afternoon, July 8.

"This is the first time ever after a camp that I said I wanted to come back next year - and I've been to a lot of camps," proclaimed Simeon Bannister, 12, a student at Frederick Douglass Middle School.

The mostly black youths from the Rochester area spent July 5-8 at the Colgate Rochester Divinity School, 1100 S. Goodman St. During that time, they discussed several violence-related issues in their community and also learned leadership skills to overcome such violence.

This event was held in conjunction with the Rochester Challenge Against Violence, a month-long effort to reduce crime on the City of Rochester's north-east side.

Serving as host for the symposium was the Divinity School's National Resource Center for the Development of

Ethical Leadership from the Black Church Tradition. In addition to the ecumenical program held last week, a similar youth gathering was scheduled to take place at the Goodman Street campus from July 11-14.

Last Friday's closing day saw youths and adults gather for an afternoon of boisterous praise songs and anti-violence skits in an auditorium adorned with displays chronicling American black history.

One of the more sobering skits depicted a teenage boy trying to impress a girl at a party by telling her that he has a gun. He brandishes the weapon and is apprehended by an authority, but that person is then shot in an ensuing scuffle by somebody else carrying a gun.

In a concluding discussion of the week's events, youths were asked to rate which indicator of ethical leadership they considered to be most important: community, competence, vision, courage, commitment or compassion.

Mishonna McCottry, 12, a New York City resident, chose vision. "All of us wouldn't be here if it wasn't for God. So he must have had a vision for us being here," she commented.

Sharonda Thomas, 13, who portrayed God in one of the Friday skits, drew laughs with her explanation of why she selected courage. "It took a lot of courage for me to go up there and play

God!" the Franklin High School student acknowledged.

Others chose courage as well, saying they'd been shy when the week began but now found it much easier to interact with their newly found friends.

Jacquelyn Dobson, who serves as director of the diocesan Office of Black Ministries, believes that it's vital for today's blacks to conduct religious-based gatherings such as these more regularly.

"As we look at violence in this community, and communities across the country, much of it is due to the fact that we have departed from black church tradition, which emphasizes spirituality, commitment to family, and community," said Dobson. "When you have these things working well in your life, that normally effects positive self-esteem, which is just about absent or null-and-void in many of our youth today."

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