



## Empowering Kids to Believe in Their Unlimited Abilities

*"There's something inside so STRONG and I know that I can make it!"*

Mornings at Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools are energizing and inspiring. After a nutritious breakfast, the day starts with "Harambee!", a time for children and staff to share, sing and celebrate themselves and each other. "Harambee," which means "let's pull together" in Swahili, puts students in a positive mindset for their day of reading instruction, thoughtful discussions and engaging learning activities.

"The best part is meeting new people, doing so many fun activities and we have fun teachers," said Jayla, a scholar at James Lawson Freedom School in Allentown.

10-year-old Jayla is one of 110 children who attended the James Lawson Freedom School, held in the Christ Lutheran Church in Allentown, during the summer of 2021. Traditionally serving underrepresented communities, Freedom Schools empower children and young adults to excel and believe in their ability to make a difference in themselves and in their families, schools, communities, country and world.

"The Freedom Schools Movement is really about helping our children fall in love with reading, fall in love with learning, but most importantly, fall in love with themselves," said Dr. Alisha Tatem, Project Director at James Lawson Freedom School.

Freedom Schools engage young adults, parents, community leaders, and community-based organizations to create supportive and nurturing environments where every child can thrive. Referred to as scholars, the students enrolled in a Freedom Schools program are part of a community with caring adults, social interaction, peers to turn to and a safe space to learn and grow. The program strengthens children's sense of self-worth and boosts their motivation to read by exposing them to books with characters that look like the communities they serve.

“Children don’t see themselves in the faculty or administration in the learning environments they attend or in the books they read or the history they learn,” said Pastor Greg Edwards, Sr. Pastor of Resurrected Life Community Church UCC and Executive Director of James Lawson Freedom School. The program allows each scholar to feel seen and heard by exposing them to readings where they see themselves in the world.

The teachers, known as Servant Leader Interns, say that seeing Black and Brown staff and characters in books promotes deeper engagement with the readings and discussions. Representation matters in communities of color, because “you really can’t be what you can’t see,” said Magnus Hanson, Servant Leader Intern and junior at West Chester University of PA.

Some scholars say they have never seen themselves represented in books in schools. “I felt good inside and that I’m not the only one who looks like this. I’m not alone,” said Izaari, 8-year-old scholar.

Freedom Schools give children additional opportunities and a chance to focus on themselves, their goals, and their aspirations. “The Freedom Schools program gives scholars a plethora of resources to support a different kind of vision,” said Akshara Vivekananthan, Assistant Director, Education at United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley. “Scholars are able to discover ‘I can do this’ and ‘I can see this opportunity for me,’ she added.

United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley and the Freedom Schools Partnership aim to elevate and grow the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools program to reach more students throughout the Lehigh Valley. There are not enough summer learning opportunities here in the region that serve our students of color. “Making an investment in our children is making an investment in the totality of the community,” said Pastor Edwards.

***When you support United Way of the Greater Lehigh Valley’s Community Building Fund, you help scholars like Jayla and Izaari access safe and empowering learning environments that are focused on literacy and cultural enrichment.***