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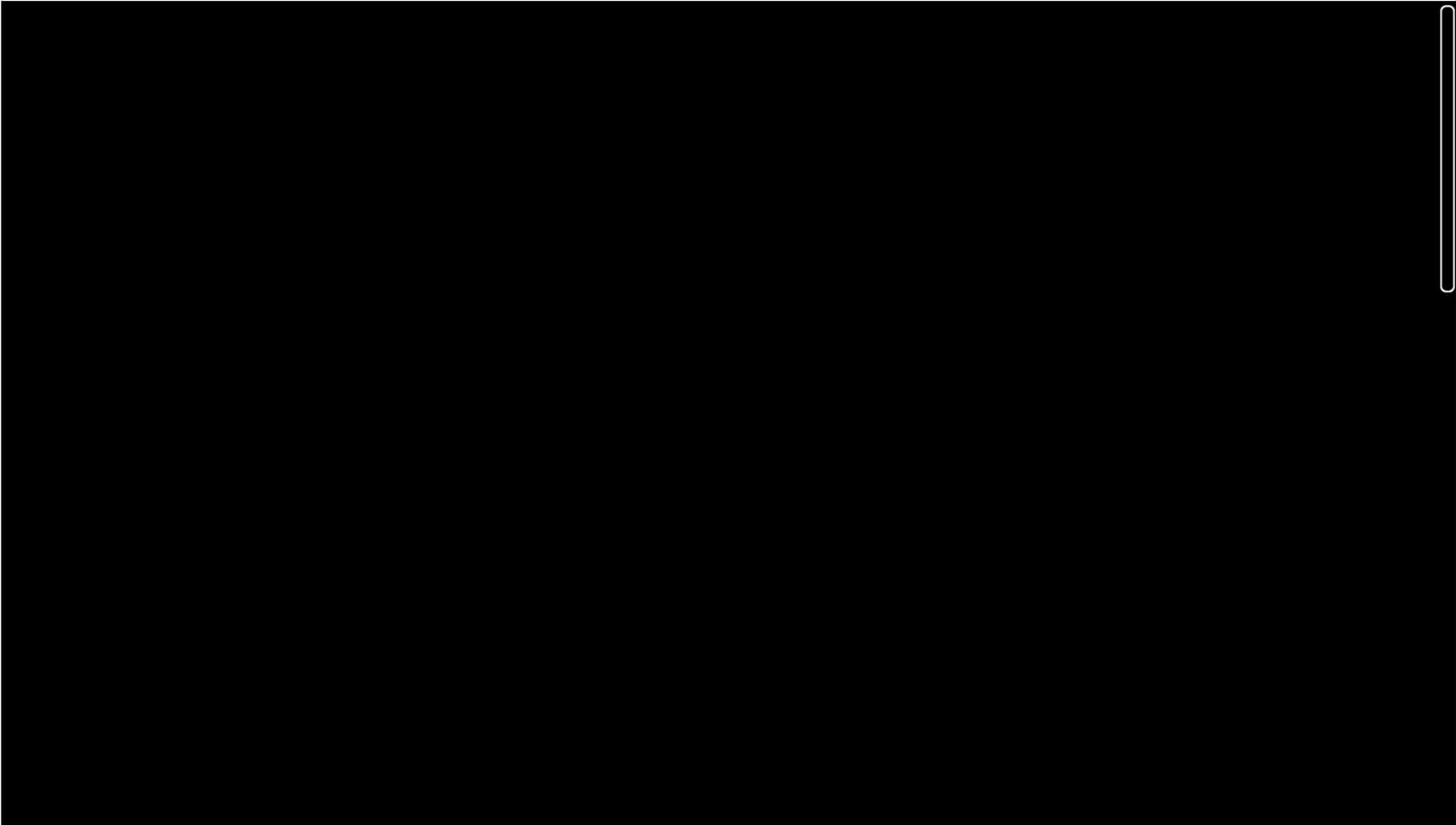
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Addressing negative stereotypes of black men, yearlong program reaches end

By BY EILEEN AMBROSE and THE BALTIMORE SUN
JAN 29, 2012 AT 8:37 PM



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Using music, poetry, dance and art, the Black Male Identity Project has been striving for the past year to overturn negative stereotypes of African-American men.

"We know that Baltimore City has a lot of problems, but we wanted to celebrate the role of artists, of storytellers in producing narratives that can help us discover solutions," said Fanon Hill, a musician and co-director of the project.

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On Sunday, the project concluded at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, but organizers say the program's positive message will carry on here and elsewhere.

Sunday's event featured collages of magazine images, mixed-media self-portraits, paintings, a story quilt, poetry, even family crests by third-graders and other school-age artists.

Negative images of black men ultimately hurt everyone, organizers said Sunday.

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"So long as our culture continues to view black men and black boys through a filter

of unconscious negativity ... we're not benefiting because we are not taking advantage of the human resources that are out there," said Peter Bruun, the project coordinator.

The Black Male Identity Project was launched by Art on Purpose, a local organization that received a grant for the program from the Open Society Foundation's Campaign for Black Male Achievement. It held events for youth and adults throughout the past year.

Last summer, for instance, the project launched a series of performances of music, poetry and dance that attracted more than 1,000 attendees, mostly children, Hill said. For adults, the project hosted conversations that focused on a different topic each week, such as health, college and the economy.

"We just didn't talk about problems. We wanted to present solutions," Hill said.

Hill said one of the successes of the program was its ability to foster connections between people and the resources available to help them thrive.

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Though this was a Baltimore program, Hill said he believes it will catch on elsewhere based on "countless calls" that he and a fellow director have received from groups in other cities.

"Everyone is watching this project," he said.

However, this was the final project for the nonprofit Art on Purpose, which was founded six years ago but is shutting down because of the weak economy, Bruun said.

Visitors Sunday said they were drawn to the project's theme.

"At this time in our country, we need all kinds of positive images in terms of strengthening the black males in our community," said Alveteus Z. Baylor-Taylor of Baltimore.

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Baylor-Taylor, a kindergarten teacher at Sharp-Leadenhall Elementary in South Baltimore, said she came looking for something positive to bring back to her young male students.

Lionel Moore of Baltimore brought his 11-year-old son to find out more about the project and opportunities for both son and dad to get involved.

As a director of the family division for Prince George's County Circuit Court, Moore said, he has seen the problems facing African-American men and wants to find ways to volunteer and help out.

"I know that the black male in particular is struggling right now to have relevancy in this society," Moore said

Organizers put together some of the project's highlights on a DVD that they hope will be used in the classroom. To request a free copy, go to morethan28days.com.

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