WHEDco unveils ‘Safe Spaces at WHEDco’ project

By Bronx Times

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A research initiative by WHEDco and New York University, “Safe Spaces at WHEDco” explores the role of safe spaces in the lives of students from WHEDco’s after-school program at PS/IS 218 in the Concourse/Highbridge. Photos courtesy Argenis Apolinario
The South Bronx nonprofit Women’s Housing and Economic Development Corporation (WHEDco) has unveiled its “Safe Spaces at WHEDco” project with the launch of a new website.

A research initiative by WHEDco and New York University, “Safe Spaces at WHEDco” explores the role of safe spaces — places of physical, mental and emotional safety—in the lives of students from WHEDco’s after-school program at PS/IS 218 in the Concourse/Highbridge.

Over a six-week period beginning in April, WHEDco After-School Program Group Leader Mario Ynfante and Senior Director of Research and Program Development Dr. Nicole Lavan, conducted interviews about safe spaces with 10 PS/IS 218 students, ages 12-14, from WHEDco’s afterschool program. The interviews illuminate the physical, mental and emotional forms of safety they have experienced at WHEDco, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new website features excerpts from the interviews, along with images by photographer Argenis Apolinario documenting the students’ experiences.

“The pandemic has exacerbated the anxiety and insecurity that many young people were already feeling,” said Davon Russell, president of WHEDco. “Now, more than ever, they need places where they feel accepted and safe to express themselves without fear, so they can grow as individuals within their community. The Safe Spaces at WHEDco project has given our students a platform to explain why safe spaces are important to them.”

During the interviews, many of the students explained how safe spaces give them confidence to try new experiences, knowing they will be free from harm and will be supported.

“WHEDco’s afterschool program has made my sister less shy and made us both more active and good at communicating,” said sixth-grade student Nerly Molina. “The activities have helped me realize
what I excel at are sewing and going out to the gym and being active.”

Connections with caring adults — which help build trust, agency and voice — are another key component of safe spaces reflected in the students’ interviews.

“Whenever I was down, someone from WHEDco would come and talk to me and help me feel safe,” said eighth-grade student Christina Adja. “That’s what it’s all about.”

A student in the WHEDco Safe Spaces program.

In addition, students expressed that the availability of safe spaces at WHEDco’s afterschool program provides a sense of security for their parents, too.

“I am able to be myself with the staff members,” said eighth-grade student Kiana Peprah. “I feel comfortable and at ease around the staff members even if they are new. During the activities that we do, I’m able to interact with the staff without feeling nervous or vulnerable. The staff also helps me to try something new. Safe spaces are important because it has helped involve my family and
both of my parents can trust that I will be happy and safe at the
WHEDco afterschool program while also giving them time to work.”

The “Safe Spaces at WHEDco” project is made possible by funding
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professor Amaryllis Estrella as well as Rayna Rapp and Helena
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Link: https://www.bxtimes.com/whedco-unveils-safe-spaces-at-whedco-project/