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Jack and Jill of America, Chicago Chapter celebrates 75th anniversary with DuSable Museum exhibit, gala and teen docents

By DARCEL ROCKETT | CHICAGO TRIBUNE | APR 19, 2022 AT 1:50 PM

A lot of history occurs in the span of 75 years.

It's that history that the Jack and Jill of America, Chicago Chapter wants to share with the world in an upcoming DuSable Museum of African American History interactive exhibit and gala celebration that honors the organization's 75th anniversary.

Jack and Jill of America Inc. is a national organization centered on Black mothers and children from toddler to 19. Its mission is to nurture Black youth and create future leaders through leadership development, volunteerism, philanthropy and civic duty. Chicago became the 11th chapter and the first in Chicagoland, after local moms requested to join. The Chicago Chapter counts 125 mothers and more than 250 children among its ranks. (It is one of 40 chapters in the Midwest, and one of nine Chicagoland chapters.)

To mark the occasion, more than a dozen of the Chicago chapter's teen members were trained for six weeks by DuSable staff to become docents for the Saturday celebration.

"This is a way to bring them into the celebration and have them be engaged but also provide a resource to the DuSable, and also give them an opportunity to enhance or build leadership skills," said Djenne Clayton, Chicago Chapter teen training coordinator.

On a spring Saturday, the docents wrapped up their

training with a run-through to show what they learned, the majority of which was done virtually. Teens got to choose which area of the museum they wanted to cover, from Margaret Burroughs to Harold Washington to Chicago's 1919 Race Riot and the Black male and female soldiers of WWI.

"It's OK not to know everything," Sydney Perkins, DuSable's education outreach specialist said to the youth at the start of the last training day earlier this month. "The point is to bring people in, add to their experience

and interact ... finding stories that you can relate to, are excited to share. Researching and focusing on specific stories to share the theme of the exhibit. Make it a conversation."

It was the final day of preparation for the gala, but the collaboration of the Jack and Jill Chicago Chapter and the DuSable is one of support — and one the organization wants similar nonprofits to follow.



Jack and Jill volunteer docents Josh Clayton, left, a sophomore from University Lab School, explains an exhibit to guests at the DuSable Museum in Chicago on April 9, 2022. (Vincent D. Johnson / Pioneer Press)

"I think that it is incumbent upon local community organizations similar to Jack and Jill to support other local organizations that are inside of the community," said Roni Jackson, Jack & Jill Chicago Chapter's gala chair. "The DuSable is a hidden gem and for us to be able to support another Black cultural institution, and continue to amplify stories of African Americans, Black stories that are told in truth, is incredibly important and for our children to learn that now, so they can go out and be vocal mouthpieces for themselves and for the rest of the community."

The multimedia Jack & Jill exhibit, “Rooted in Legacy, Growing Toward the Future,” will have a garden theme to represent growth, hope and optimism while also highlighting the chapter’s work through the years, Jackson said. A 20-foot tall, 3-D tree will be prominent in between window panels featuring two televisions that will show a film of interviews with Jack and Jill members from every decade since the 1940s, sharing their experiences with the organization. Other parts of the show will include signs of affirmation, a sensory writing board for children to touch, and many Chicago Chapter photos from its 1947 inception to now. Four other Chicagoland chapters (Western Cook County, Magnificent Mile, North Shore and South Suburban) participated in the exhibit and will also have individual chapter videos included. The Chicago Chapter support also extends to a membership drive for the DuSable.



Jack and Jill docent Aspen Bilton-Gregoire, left, a senior from Whitney Young, talks to visitors about an exhibit at the DuSable Museum in Chicago on April 9, 2022. (Vincent D. Johnson / Pioneer Press)

“The exhibit is about help, about nurturing the soil, and planting seeds, and then building and growing from there,” Jackson said. “That’s what we’ve done with our children, and we want to do that more with the broader community. More than anything it’s about the affirmation and pride in being a Black child and a contributing member of society and talks to the work that the chapter has done within the community.”

Danny Dunson, DuSable’s director of curatorial services, said he started with the most recent imagery of the Chicago chapter, specifically the youth protests over George Floyd’s murder.

“You saw these beautiful children of our community in these bright colors, holding signs that were childlike, but filled with gravitas statements of affirmation and activism, that was so important ... that connected these children with everyone,” he said. “With this, it was about knitting a story together. It wasn’t about choosing the most beautiful graphic pictures. You’ll be able to

not only know the narrative, but also apply counter narratives that relate to you or what’s going on within history at large, why this is happening during this particular time.”

Jack and Jill Chicago Chapter members Jackson, Clayton, and chapter President Cicely Glanton, all North Kenwood residents, have children working as docents. They said they brought their children into the organization for exposure to opportunities and allyship with other mothers. Jackson said Jack and Jill is a sister

village that she can rely on for anything. Clayton calls the group her tribe. Glanton said the chapter connects and bonds in much the same way a family would, a family that is making an effort to support Black businesses and cultural institutions.

“My youngest said to me after his first training session, ‘There is some pretty cool stuff in there, they need support,’” Clayton said.

“I think for them to see at a young age that there are gems where they grow up, that can offer so much value and for him to already be thinking about ‘what do they need in terms of support,’ whether it’s financial or man hours because I want to make sure that it keeps going. I’m like ‘All right, if you get nothing else out of this, then at least perhaps I built an ambassador for the future.’ ”

Noah Jackson’s area of choice was the 1919 race riot. Roni’s son is a senior at Whitney Young High School, looking forward to starting at Howard University in the fall, with plans for a journalism career. He said he wanted to be a part of the docent program because it’s essential to educate people.

“I think it’s important for them to know that what we’re seeing today, it isn’t new at all,” Jackson said. “It’s very important to help educate people around me on how long protests and movements have been going on, even if they have a new name. The main thing that spoke to me about this was that how well it paralleled the

summer of 2020 in the United States. ... We're fighting against many of the same things that we fought against back then."

Dunson said with DuSable being an education center, a repository of Black archives and showing Black visual culture from ephemera to fine art to historical objects, it's important that the gallery exists with a Jack and Jill space, to let people see what the organization is about.

"We are community service driven, creating future leaders, supportive of our community. None of that has altered in the last 35 years. If anything, it's grown significantly," Glanton said. "Other relationships that we developed like the Chicago Urban League, and of course the DuSable — it's a long list — and even at the national level, we support their initiatives, like March of Dimes and National Alliance on Mental Illness and the American Heart Association, it's gotten bigger over time and our reach is greater, which is what the moms who initially came together 80 plus years ago and launched this idea, I'm thinking that's what they expected — that this will continue to grow and evolve and the reach will get greater and our children would be amazing. And we are keeping to that commitment."

The Chicago Chapter's 75th Anniversary Gala is 6:30 p.m. Saturday. The DuSable Museum Jack and Jill exhibit will be open to the public Monday. The museum will host Jack and Jill Family Day with the teen docents (open to all Jack and Jill members, family and friends) at noon May 14.

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