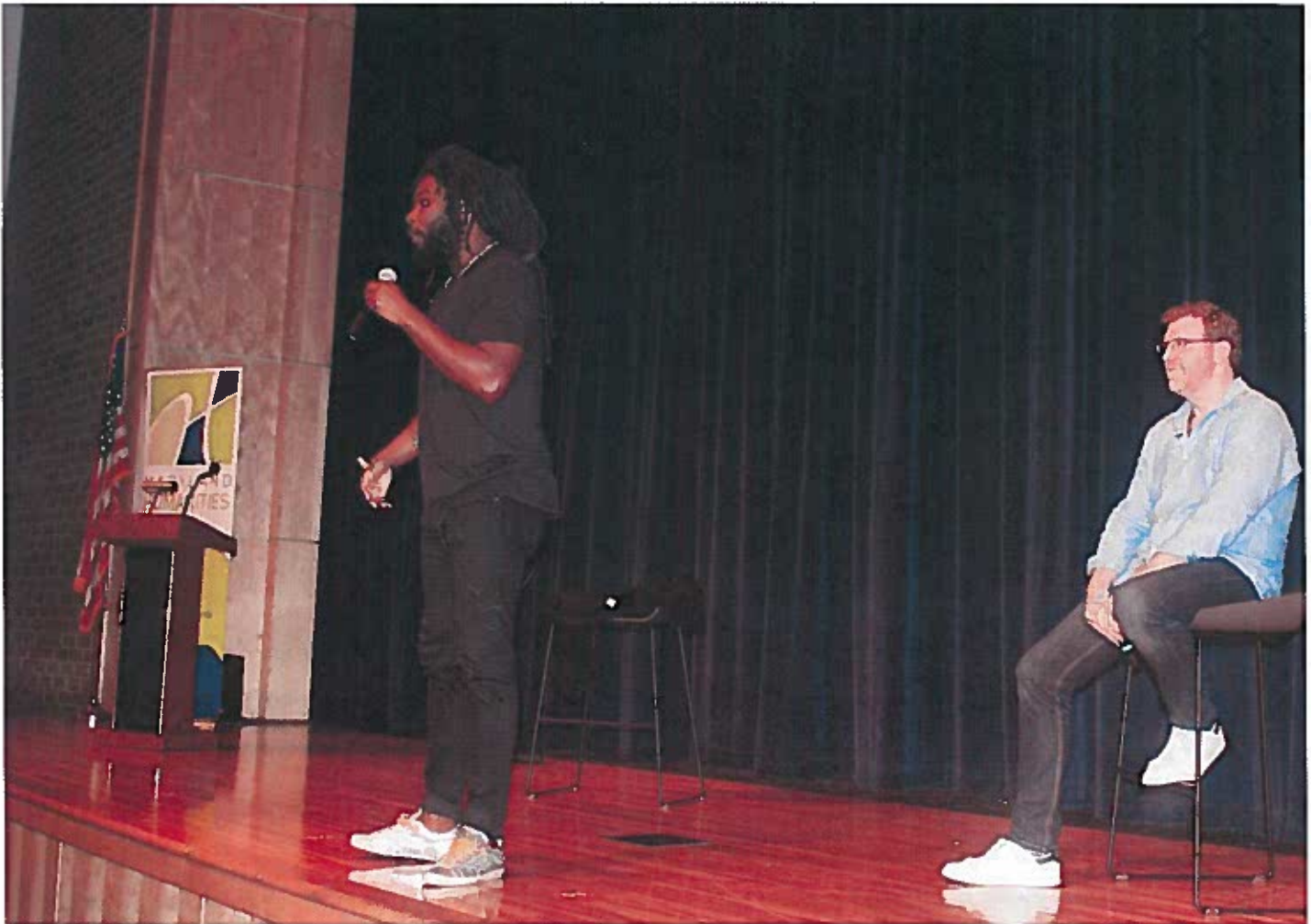


Home / The Calvert Recorder / News / Local

http://www.somdnews.com/recorder/news/local/award-winning-authors-discuss-police-brutality-with-students/article_c1f55105-223d-59e5-a3e4-39448a0c05a1.html

Award-winning authors discuss police brutality with students

By TIFFANY WATSON twatson@somdnews.com 13 hrs ago



Staff photoS By TIFFANY WATSON

Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, authors of "All American Boys," talk with students at a public forum Sept. 28 at St. Charles High in Waldorf.

A young girl named Zianna Oliphant recently wept while speaking before city leaders in Charlotte, N.C., about African-American children losing their mothers and fathers to police brutality. Her tears are a permanent stain in one's memory and proof that youth are speaking up about race issues in their communities.

On Sept. 28, authors Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely, authors of "All American Boys," participated in a public forum and meet-and-greet at St. Charles High School in Waldorf. Some Calvert County students attended as well.

Reynolds, a Washington, D.C., native, and Kiely, of Boston, were recipients of the Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent, 2016 Walter Dean Myers Award for Outstanding Children's Literature, and the 2016 Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book.

The event was sponsored by One Maryland One Book, a statewide reading project that aims to bring together diverse people in communities across Maryland through the shared experience of reading the same book and participating in discussions. In cooperation with Charles County Public School System, Charles County Public Library, Calvert Library and other sponsors, the event welcomed 325 students, teachers and residents who discussed police brutality and how it is relevant today.

"Issues such as racism and police brutality are very topical for today's society," said Sarah Guy, programming and youth services coordinator for the Charles County Public Library. "Whilst reading the novel I got upset, but unfortunately it is what happens in our society. We lobbied to have this event in Charles County because we have such a mixture of cultures in our community and the topic needs to be discussed."

"All American Boys" is a novel about two teens — one white, one black — who deal with the repercussions of a violent act that leads to division and racial tension, both locally and nationally. Written in tandem, the story takes place in a bodega with a cop, Paul Galluzzo, who mistakes a local student, Rashad, for being a shoplifter and brutally beats him. Witnesses were Quinn Collins, a varsity basketball player who has been raised by Galluzzo since his own father died in Afghanistan, and a video camera. Soon the beating is all over the news and Galluzzo is getting threatened with accusations of prejudice and racial brutality.

"The teens are left out of the discussion all the time," Reynolds said. "When we talk about police brutality in America, the people who are talking most of the time are adults — and no one is considering what young people might be feeling or thinking about an issue that is affecting them far greater than it is affecting everyone else in the country."

Reynolds and Kiely said the inspiration behind the book is the influx of public displays and awareness of police brutality. Reynolds said the final straw for both authors was the death of Michael Brown, a student shot by a police officer 12 times in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014.

"When that happened we said let's do something about it," Reynolds said. "We want to encourage this conversation in the communities, and in case the community turns its back, we want the youth to feel empowered to have these conversations on their own."

"We have been fortunate to talk with over 30,000 students across the country in all different types of communities and no matter where we go, they want to talk about it," Kiely said. "We feel like we owe it to them to start those conversations. They deserve a safe space to have a conversation about race, racism, police and brutality."

Reynolds and Kiely became friends during an unrelated book tour while watching news reports concerning police brutality across the nation. Out of their new friendship, they say, the novel was born.

"I want conversations about race, violence in America and the prevalence of racism to become a priority in all the institutions in America," Kiely said. "I hope that by having more events like these, schools will prioritize conversations so that we're no longer under the yolk of that silence but we're confronting it realistically. As a white man, I encourage white folks to get past their own comfortability so that the rest of people in this country can feel safer."

Both authors agreed the change can start with young people.

Isaiah Johnson, 16, a student at Huntingtown High School in Calvert County, said there is not enough discussion of police brutality.

"I liked the authors' honesty about police officers having a really hard job and how it's really difficult for them to make split-second decisions," Johnson said. "The book was a little uncomfortable to read and it's scary as an African-American to know people who have gone through that, but I have hope because of the fact that there are videos, which means that people care and it's being put out there."

Jimmy Bartlebaugh, 15, also a student at Huntingtown, said he has never been exposed to this much conversation about the topic.

"I've never thought so deeply about it," Bartlebaugh said. "But I think that we are tomorrow, we shape the America that we want and this conversation is needed for our tomorrow to be good."

August Miles, 16, a student at Thomas Stone High School, said he still wonders why police officers are so brutal to black people and why everyone can't just be peaceful with one another.

"The authors were right about teens needing an outlet and safe place to talk about the book," said Denaé Huff, 16, a student at Maurice J. McDonough High School. "My stomach did turn at certain parts in the book, but I still wished I could have read more of the officer's point of view."

St. Charles High School students Zamira Flucas, 16, Madisen Adelman, 17, and Kamaria Harmon, 16, have each been distressed after watching so many online videos highlighting violent clashes between citizens and police. They feel the government needs to re-examine the police system, decrease stereotypes on the police force, and hire more officers that actually protect the communities and make residents feel safe.

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