

## YOUNG DEMOCRACY: Youth Bill of Rights made official at Battleship ceremony

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FALL RIVER —

As the plumed pen fluttered in the breeze, an air of change came to the city as young people joined with officials to sign a Youth Bill of Rights.

Young people and city officials who collaborated on the bill signed it Thursday during a ceremony on the deck of the Battleship Massachusetts. It will be hung in the Fall River

Room on the sixth floor of Government Center.

The first of its kind in the commonwealth and only the third to be written in the United States, the Youth Bill of Rights expresses the need to give youths a greater voice in the community and outlines the basic rights every young person deserves. The bill also focuses on five areas — education, environment, health, future and support — as keystones in ensuring young people are able to become effective members of the public.

The bill was developed during a four-month process. Youths worked together to develop the ideas and then consult with city leaders, including Mayor Robert Correia, City Councilor Linda Pereira and School Committee Vice Chairman Mark Costa. Correia, who has already committed to giving youths a spot on city boards and committees, said the work of involving young people doesn't end with the signing.

"We can easily talk, but we must follow the rhetoric with action," Correia said. "This will put into effect the process to ensure the torch is passed on... and those after us will hold it even higher and brighter than we did."

He commended the youths for stepping up at an early age to aid in the city's growth, saying "most people don't realize they should be paying back their community until it's too late."

The ceremony included personal accounts from youth speakers as they introduced the topics of the five articles contained in the bill.

Sarah Jeffries, who graduated from B.M.C. Durfee High School in June, graduate, called for a safe, affordable and quality education for all students. She talked about her struggle to stay in school until she was introduced to the Resiliency Preparatory School. At one time, Jeffries said, she skipped school more often than she attended, but now she will continue her education and look at a possible career in law.

"Education is a key part in improving our community," Jeffries said.

Matthew Nhem spoke about the need for caring adults and role models in the lives of youths. It's a need he learned firsthand after becoming involved in gangs and being beaten up because he was wearing the wrong colors at a gathering. He said turned his life around after joining the Peaceful Coalition.

"I am what I am today because I found positive role models and positive people in my life," Nhem said.

It was stories like these that led City Council President Joseph Camara to call the youths who developed the Bill of Rights "heroes."

Jasiel Correia II, a member of TADA from the BOLD Coalition was among the leaders of the group to develop the bill, called the signing "a victory for the community."

"This is a victory rooted in the idea that youths can make a difference," Jasiel Correia said.