

# Richmond Confidential

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Andre Taylor did his best to steel his nerves. Brave face. Inner monologue reminding him that his raps were sharp.

But Taylor's 16-year-old vocal chords involuntarily quavered. His palms felt cold. His first performance loomed, moments away.

Didn't matter. The lyrics, honed over long hours wouldn't fail him.

"... just imagine all the people in the hood goin' wild/and my momma screamin', 'that's my child ...'" Taylor rapped to a small but enthusiastic audience.

Taylor was one of hundreds of youths, community members and civic leaders who turned out for the RYSE Center's 2nd Annual "Back to School Summer Jam" on Aug. 21. RYSE is Richmond's most renowned community youth center. The center was opened in 2008 after County Supervisor John Gioia and several local community groups secured funding for what was at the time a vacant 6,600 square foot vacant county building.

"The RYSE center is where I come to find a positive place to work on my creativity," Taylor said. "I have confidence now that I can rise to be anything I want to be."

RYSE serves hundreds of kids as a comprehensive youth center, including education programs for media arts. On Saturday, several local youths toted cameras and microphones, conducting interviews and recording the festivities.

Supervisor Gioia was one of several local leaders who attended. Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, Police Chief Chris Magnus and City Council candidate Eduardo Martinez were also on hand.

Richmond has been plagued by crime and high drop-out rates in local schools for years. Gioia said the RYSE center is key to the city's future. The concept for the RYSE center, which has a youthful, idealistic staff and colorful graffiti-style murals adorning its walls – inside and out – was first outlined by local youth organizers after four high school students were killed by gunfire in December 2000. The deaths "galvanized youth and adult allies to address the root causes of violence in and around their communities," according to RYSE's web site.

Gioia, whose embrace of the grassroots movement helped secure funding and resources for the center's eventual fruition, said RYSE has lived up to the expectations.

"It's great to come out and really support young people, that's what this is about," Gioia said. "The center was designed to put young people in positions of leadership, and for them to decide what kind of change needs to occur in the community."

The Saturday event also drew several public and private resource providers offering health, education and nutrition services.

In addition to Taylor's performance, other young artists delivered musical performances and artwork by RYSE center youths was on display.

Despite his brief bout with nerves, Taylor showed no poverty of ambition.

"I'm going to be famous, and I'm not going to let anything stop me," he said, smiling.