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The Olney Youth Arts Festival returned after a 4-year hiatus with creativity and a strong sense of togetherness

More than 300 community members gathered at Thurgood Marshall Elementary for the return of the Olney Youth Arts Festival.



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The Esperanza Academy Dance Ensemble performs at the Olney Youth Arts Festival Saturday at Thurgood Marshall School in Philadelphia.

Joe Lamberti

by Michelle Myers
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For 10-year-old dancer Alahna Fields, Olney is a neighborhood “with big

houses, flowers, and trees, where people go through a lot, but are still loving.” That warmth made itself evident on Saturday for the return of the Olney Youth Arts Festival.

After a four-year pandemic hiatus, the Olney Cultural Lab dusted off the art supplies to welcome Philadelphians for a day of artistic expression, food and cultural inclusion.

Unlike in previous years, the festival was held indoors, at Thurgood Marshall Elementary, due to the chilly weather. But, the spirit remained the same: to bring the community together through art.

“We are tons of different communities here, with multiple languages and cultures,” said quilt artist and volunteer Carla Wiley. “Art goes across those things, giving us an opportunity to speak to each other and do things together.”

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As people entered the venue, they were given a piece of fabric on which Wiley encouraged them to write their name and paint a pattern with their fingers. The goal? To make a quilt of the fabric of the community by the end of the evening.

“It’s important for adults and children to have ways of expressing themselves that are not destructive,” said Wiley, a longtime Olney resident. The statement resonated with 17-year-old dancer Scarlett Gomez.

As she prepared to take the stage, Gomez confessed that at times it feels as if there are [not a lot of spaces for teenagers to hang out](#) without getting in trouble.

“Having events like this gives us space to explore,” she explained. “That’s good because sometimes it feels like we [teenagers] are getting a bad reputation for the actions of some,” said Gomez, who dreams of becoming a fashion business manager, but has been unable to get a job in clothing stores because of what she believes has to do with recent [looting](#) involving young people and retail spaces.

As community members celebrated the performances, visited the resource hub that provided information on a variety of community and

housing programs, and enjoyed a taste of empanadas, one thing was clear, said Germantown resident Bernard Baker: “This needs to be replicated in other neighborhoods.

“It’s harder for our children growing up in these communities to see positive things. Anything like this is always a plus. There is so much good and so much talent that comes out of these communities.”

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