

Written Testimony for the 4/10/2024 Operating Budget Hearing
By Arianna Ross

As a mother, parent of 2 children (One 15 years old and another 6 years old), an artist, educator, voter, CEO of the non-profit Story Tapestries and a lifelong resident of Montgomery County, I have witnessed a growing percentage of youth and adults who feel strongly that they have no voice and are at a huge economic disadvantage to other people. I have witnessed a lack of equity between those who receive extra educational services and certain types of programs after school and within the community and those that simply can't afford the cost and/or the time to take advantage of those programs.

The MSDE reports in 2022-23 only 42% of children were ready for kindergarten, with 29% of those living in poverty demonstrating readiness. The gap is larger based on economic status and ethnicity, with 56% of Caucasian kindergarteners deemed ready, compared to 22% of Latino/a students and 37% of African American students (MSDE, 2022). Children and adults experiencing dysphoric states (consistent state of profound sadness) lack developmental social and emotional learning opportunities. Dysphoric states, combined with increased exposure to traumatic events, underlie the current mental health crisis. In the U.S., one in six youth ages 6-17 experience a mental health disorder each year (NAMI, 2020). The pandemic has exacerbated mental health challenges.

First, the government, businesses, and nonprofit partners must work together to improve community conditions that impact the economy, education and mental health. As a lifetime Montgomery County resident, I recognize the importance of partnering across public and private sectors to provide individuals the skills and strategies to improve their circumstances. In order to solve our challenges, each business, nonprofit and the county must be a part of the solution. Secondly, arts in education programs must focus on including students (from 0-102 years old) who are often overlooked in a traditional classroom approach. Critical analysis of research on social emotional development, the power of arts integration, and benefits of multiple modes of expression, suggests that individuals exposed to the arts better manage their emotions, improve academic performance and are more likely to succeed.

Many individuals living off of a higher budget in Montgomery County are able to afford programs that are not included in the public system for their children or themselves from a very young age through adulthood. A large sector of adults and older youth might have access to classes to improve their skills and subsequently their job options but they can't afford to take the time to enrich their capacity for growth. Story Tapestries, the Hope Project, and many other incredible companies like WorkSource Montgomery provide job training and connections to opportunities. Story Tapestries offers Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide Program and Write Your Story where we've seen how important it is to combine support for hard and soft skills - people who have faced trauma and challenge also need to build their confidence and belief in themselves in order to be successful! Hope Project offers CDL training and Tech training. But there needs to be a greater influx of support to turn Montgomery County around which is why I personally support County Council President Friedson's Jobs Initiative especially the The Equity Fund which will help early and growth-stage small Montgomery County companies that are either majority owned by entrepreneurs from underserved communities or located in a Montgomery County Equity Focus area.

Furthermore, before we become adults, we have to survive and thrive within our childhood. It is clear to me as a mom and a non-profit CEO that there is a huge disparagement between the types of early childhood education in one community to the next. Due to the fact that my children have been able to attend preschool and I have had the capacity to read to both of my children every single day since they were born, they have entered school with higher literacy skills than individuals without access to school and books. Some of you may be familiar with Imagination library, an organization that gives free books to children ages 0-5 years old. I am now on the board. I am delighted to tell you that the State of MD just informed the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) of Montgomery County that it is providing a matching grant for \$85,913 for FY 25. The purpose of the grant is to expand the program in high need zip codes. Today, I ask you to assist them with matching funds. Ideally, we would like the full match (\$85,913).

Beyond that, I ask that you consider confirming within the base budget the funds for BlackRock, \$700,000 for the AHCMC as well as funds for Story Tapestries to do the critical work that occurs before and after MCPS. Next year, my daughter will be going to Poolesville Elementary School. Although I am economically stable, it will be difficult for us to afford special programs as we will need to pay \$690 a month for before and after care as both my husband and I work. Other children have access to robotics, theatre, dance and poetry after school because they simply can afford these classes. Other individuals like myself are dependent on organizations like Story Tapestries, 480 Cares, Black Rock Center for the Arts, LAYC and many others to raise money to provide free programs to their children.

When I was a child in Montgomery County, I grew up in Bethesda. I went to Walter Johnson HS. I definitely saw the world through rose colored glasses. However, I was bullied for being different, for having curly brown hair and having friends who were from all over the world. Over the last 26 years of my life in Montgomery County and the last 14 years of running of Story Tapestries, I have seen a side that I had not understood existed. I wish us to become a community that:

- works together to serve each other
- builds neighborhoods who are equitable both economically and culturally
- reflects the story we hope to see
- provides equal access to early childhood education
- raises young leaders who go on to change the world.

People may argue that Montgomery County already does all of the above. I have witnessed young people being bullied for being who they are, what they believe, where they come from, and what their economic situation represents. On a daily basis through Story Tapestries and as a community leader, I have youth share with me stories of moments where their voice is suppressed and their value demeaned. Recently a young man at a Middle School in Germantown, told me that adults will tell him that they care, but the truth is that they don't. He was shocked when I spent time with him helping him to craft his story. He did not see himself as worthwhile. Even though Story Tapestries finds small pockets of funding to work with young

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people in all types of communities, I find myself as a mom and person going the extra mile to keep trying to give them more. Please as a County Council consider this year going the extra and funding the pieces I named above and working to create a more just, effective and powerful Montgomery County.