

Mandel Youth Humanities Academy

Alumni Perspectives (2024 Cohort)



Gabrielle J. //
Brush High School

What has been your favorite learning activity?

The program has definitely surprised me. At the beginning of the summer, I thought it was going to be like school and strictly schoolbooks, but it was much more interactive. I've genuinely learned. I didn't think I was going to enjoy waking up early in the morning to get here, but I did enjoy it because I was in an intellectually diverse environment. This learning environment pushed me to think more about my morals, why I take a stand, and where I stand. In fact, the first day I got home from the program, I was like, "Y'all, I love this program." It pushes you to think so deeply, and I love that. I also like that you weren't just doing it to get a grade. It was purely just education. You were actually applying what you learned for you.

My favorite week was archeology and anthropology week. It made me think differently about the cultures of the past and how the footprints that we leave today are going to be things that the people in the future are going to look back upon. It made me really question, "What are the archives that you're leaving behind? What are the footprints that you're leaving behind? What will that say about your identity and who you are as a person?" To me, that related back to the "Who are we?" and "Who am I?" questions. If you were to write down on paper who you are, what would that be? So, for me, it was like, "What footprint, what archives will I leave behind that would give me a sense of identity in the future?" Another one was the Socratic dialogues. This pushed my mind to think creatively but also analytically to connect it back to my points. It made my creative mind and my analytical part of mind combine forces.

In what way did you grow from your experience?

I think the program revealed to me that I naturally possess intellectual virtues like curiosity and honesty. But the one

that hit home to me was intellectual autonomy. That's a big one. I didn't realize how to properly practice it. Intellectual autonomy is basically where you're able to think for yourself but not by yourself. You're using other thinkers and other information to assist your own thinking. That's lowkey what this whole program is. It's about helping people develop their autonomy so they can think on their own.

I also think, in the humanities, there's this safe place where you can have two different points of view while still coming together to form one consensus. I think that's what brings diversity — it's not necessarily saying that you have to get rid of your differences but come together and embrace them and create something new with those differences. Our discussions also gave me a model for engaging. As a society, we've become a little bit too prone to violence, and we've become scared of disagreements, so having this area where we can reach a consensus can help us aim for the ultimate goal of peace.

What would you say to others interested in the program?

It felt good being in a safe environment where I could voice my opinion. I know now I'm more confident and bolder in voicing my opinion, but I voice it in a way of not pressuring others for their opinion. Instead, I'm really open to understanding others and seeing their mindsets. I've also changed in the sense that I'm beginning to think beyond the surface. If I told others to join the program, I would say, "It's going to change you for the better, and it's going to push you to think in a way that you haven't thought before. It's going to help you mature as well, and you're going to grow some good connections from being here."



Natalie G. //
West Geauga High School

What has been your favorite learning activity?

In general, I really like our discussions in the big room and the circle where we bounce ideas back and forth and have arguments that weren't traditional oppositional arguments — but more like arguments about forming ideas and building on top of what other people said. This approach to learning gives each person time to think about and respond to other people. The circle discussions also connect to the idea of intellectual autonomy or thinking for oneself but not by oneself. We are developing our own approaches to thinking and kind of relearning how we teach ourselves, but we're not doing it alone. We have the responsibility to be intellectually honest.

In what ways did you grow from the summer experience?

In the program, we are exploring “Who am I? Who are we? Who decides?” These questions make me wonder how I can best represent the complex thoughts that I'm having, like how I make sense of what I'm actually thinking and what is the most productive way to communicate that idea. There's no point in trying to be intellectual if I can't convey those thoughts in a way that other people are going to understand because then the connection is lost. As a result, my writing has become more honest. The prompts pushed me to write about topics that I wouldn't have necessarily wanted to write about and were more personal to me. Rhetoric week, in particular, was when my writing became more honest. I realized that what I'm willing to share with others has become much more personal.

What would you say to others interested in the program?

I would encourage them not to give up because it's a lot. It's a lot of mental heavy lifting. It's a lot of making yourself uncomfortable for the sake of gaining more intellectual awareness. So, I would encourage them to persevere. You see these writing prompts, or you hear these big questions that you may not understand, or you might not be able to follow the conversation, and you think, “Yes, this is it — I've hit my limit.” But if you push yourself even a little bit today, then tomorrow, you're not going to have to run as hard to get there. I feel like most of the students at the end of the program are going to be able to leave and say, “Yes, this benefited me even if I wanted to stop halfway through.”



Taijaiha J. //
John Hay High School

What has been your favorite learning activity?

It was a work of art in the Museum of Contemporary Art. It was like pieces on the floor, and it kind of made me uncomfortable and scared a bit. But I still tried to be open-minded with it. That's what we learned here: having open-mindedness with art. I was like, "I'm still going to try to understand it even though I don't like it." I feel like this program really helped me because before, if I didn't like something, I wasn't going to look at it anymore. But I was curious to find out what the artist meant. I learned from that experience that if you're not open-minded, then you ignore opportunities that can help you expand and ignore evidence that doesn't correspond with your thinking. You're limiting yourself by being closed-minded.

In what ways did you grow from the summer experience?

First, I grew in time management. You have to put a lot into these blogs. I learned to set aside more time, go back and revise, and reflect. I also learned to be more confident and speak up. Second, when I started on the first day, I never raised my hand. I had ideas in my head, but I never said them. Now, if you ask somebody in the program, they'll say, "Yes, she answers questions all the time." I'm not scared to answer questions anymore.

Those in the program — the facilitators and my peers — saw another side of me, and they opened it up. I feel like when I go back to school, I'll be a whole different person with answering questions in class.

Third, we talked about intellectual autonomy. It's like having your own sense of things but also taking help from other people. You don't have to do it all by yourself, and you don't have to completely go off what others say. Just have both of those ideas in your head when you're making decisions about how you write stuff. Like, we were just talking today about the feedback from our blogs. Before this, I would say I didn't like feedback on my stuff. If someone told me, "No, this isn't right — you need to fix this," I didn't like that. But today made me realize how I've really grown in that sense. I actually take other people's advice now. I can still stick with my ideas and think about how I can expand them. Just having that open-mindedness helps me learn from their feedback. They're ahead of me, and I can see their input as a learning opportunity to make me better. I don't have to take it as an offense or get mad about their feedback.

What would you say to others interested in the program?

Be open to the questions! "Who am I?" is more complex than what we say, such as my name or where we go to school. It's really people who make us who we are, and that builds on who we are. There's also more to who you are that you just haven't discovered yet. For example, in the first week, we went to improv. I never did that before, but when I did it, I started loving it. I was like, "This is really a part of who I am." Acting is a new way of viewing things and allows you to put yourself in another person's shoes. Now that I have that experience, I get to decide that I'm going to do more of that, and it's definitely a part of who I am.



LaNya H. //
Cleveland Heights High School

What has been your favorite learning activity?

The trips and deep discussions. I honestly just thought it was going to be a bunch of classes and stuff like that with a lot of reading. I knew we'd have to do assignments, but I didn't really picture how it would turn out. I just assumed they'd be take-home assignments that we'd bring back the next day or at the end of the week or something like that. But I feel like the interactions have surprised me the most because I didn't expect it to be as interactive as it was. Everybody talked to each other a lot, and it was very hands-on. That's one of the things I didn't really expect. And all the trips we went on and the places we visited were really cool, too. The program and the trips just give you a new perspective on things. I've lived in Cleveland my whole life, but a lot of the places we went, I'd never even been to. So, it was cool to see — it gave me a good perspective on things outside of Cleveland.

In what ways did you grow from the summer experience?

I think I'll definitely take a lot of the things I learned with me, especially from Literature Week and Art Week. During Literature Week, I wrote my first poem about myself, and when we did our blog at the end

of the week, I felt like I needed to include it. Then, for Art History Week, I really enjoyed exploring what our meanings of art are. I knew that everyone has different interpretations, but actually seeing some of the pieces challenged and made me question my own understanding of art.

What would you say to others interested in the program?

I would honestly tell them to come in here, be yourself, and be open-minded. When you get here, you're going to have to open up and speak up sometimes. I'm a very quiet person and don't talk that much, but I've had to step out of my comfort zone so many times. Doing that has boosted my confidence a little bit. Before, I wouldn't even do presentations in high school — I'd ask my teacher if I could come in after school to do them. But here, when I was put on the spot, I had to do it. It was definitely an experience I had to get used to, but I'd say to come here ready to be open and voice your opinions.



JACK, JOSEPH AND MORTON MANDEL
YOUTH HUMANITIES ACADEMY