

Written Testimony for the 4/07/2025 Operating Budget Hearing  
By Arianna Ross

*Thank you, President Stewart, VP Jawando, and honorable Council Members for this opportunity to address you today.*

As a mother, parent of 2 children (One 16 and another 7 years old), an artist, educator, voter, CEO of the non-profit Story Tapestries and a lifelong resident of Montgomery County, I have witnessed a lack of equity between those who receive extra educational and mental health services and certain types of programs after school / within the community and those that simply can't afford the cost and/or the time to take advantage of those programs. I have seen an increased level of 'isms' in our community that is reflected in what is happening on a daily basis.

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. After the last 26 years of my life in Montgomery County and the last 15 years of running of Story Tapestries, 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
- available Mental health
- 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, as a community leader and a mom I have youth and adults share with me stories of moments where their voice is suppressed and their value demeaned. Where can you the County Council Invest in the community so that stories like the one I am going to share don't happen again?

Let this resonate with you: my 16 year old child recently wrote a story about an experience she had in school in the first grade. We don't have time for the whole story but just know that 2 boys made fun of her for having dark brown curly hair for being multi-ethnic and her teacher did not defend her, make her feel valued in fact in her words..."My teacher, an adult I was supposed to trust, wasn't just ignoring what had happened. She was justifying it. Telling me I was the problem. For the rest of the day after she told me it was my fault, their bullying, I felt worthless. When the final bell rang, I climbed into my mom's car and let exhaustion take over. I didn't tell her what had happened. Knowing that if I did, she would make a big deal out of this, all I wanted to do was forget. For weeks, I carried the weight of that moment. It wasn't until two weeks before the school year ended that I finally broke down that I finally broke and I started to cry. Tears turned into sobs, ones that shook my whole body, taking my breath away. I told my mom everything: six months of whispered insults, of quiet humiliation, of eyes that felt like knives, of a teacher who had the power to protect me but chose not to. That day taught me more than any lesson in a textbook ever could. It showed me that injustice isn't always loud; sometimes, it hides in silence, in authority, and in the people we're told to respect. And it showed me that silence, no matter how heavy, will always find a way to break.

If we want things to change, 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.

I ask that you consider funding a Rec Center in Montgomery Village, continue to fund BlackRock, 3% increase for AHCMC, fully fund the schools as well as funds for Story Tapestries to do the critical work that occurs before and after MCPS. Next year, my youngest daughter will continue to go to Poolesville Elementary School. Although I am economically stable right now, 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 the public.

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, Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless 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! But there needs to be a greater influx of support to turn Montgomery County around but not such a huge tax hike as discussed when many of us are struggling to pay what is coming down the pike.

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. The MSDE reports 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. Due to the fact that my children had attended 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.

Even though Story Tapestries finds small pockets of funding to work with young people in all types of communities, I find myself as a mom and person going the extra mile to keep trying to give everyone including my children 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.