THE BEE Continued from Front Page



Inaugural BEE Champion Journey Ards celebrates with coach Victoria Brown, Reading With A Rapper co-founders Douglas Johnson and Jarren Small, Sue VanVleet, and her mother after winning The BEE championship.

*More than 40 students took the stage for Reading With A Rapper's inaugural **The BEE**, transforming academic competition into a championship experience.*

The students walked in wearing black-and-yellow jerseys, styled and personalized to express themselves.

Their names and numbers hung across their chests, Nikes on their feet, each one stepping into the Anderson Center for the Arts with the kind of quiet confidence that can only come from preparation. Reading With A Rapper's inaugural BEE opened on Juneteenth, June 19, 2026, and before a single word was spelled, the room already understood what it was looking at: a competition built to make intellectual achievement look like exactly what it is.

Athletic. Earned. Worth showing up for.

That was intentional. Reading With A Rapper Co-Founder and CEO Jarren Small, a former basketball player himself, envisioned The BEE as a competition that would treat intellectual achievement with the same energy, visibility, and excitement often reserved for athletics. Presented by Title Sponsor the NBA Foundation, the event borrowed familiar elements from game day culture. Students wore jerseys, competed in four quarters, and entered a room filled with clappers, thunder sticks, and cheering supporters who rooted for academic excellence with the same enthusiasm often seen courtside.

The ceremony opened with students from the Rhodes School for the Performing Arts performing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the Negro National Anthem, a choice that grounded everything that followed in history. This event was born on the same day the ancestors of Black Houstonians first heard the news that they were free. That lineage was in the room, and the students standing in front of the audience seemed to know it.

Four Quarters. One Stage.

The BEE was structured the way Reading With A Rapper has always operated: with intention baked into every detail. The competition moved through four quarters: traditional spelling, Freedmen's Town trivia centered on Juneteenth history, championship trivia, and championship spelling. More than 100 students across partner campuses prepared for The BEE with support from coaches provided through the Reading With A Rapper program. Each campus hosted its own in-house spelling competition, with top performers advancing to the championship stage at the Anderson Center for the Arts. More than 40 students ultimately competed, representing Cobb Elementary, Legacy School of Sports Sciences, Northwest Public Schools' Visual and Performing Arts Academy, Monahan, Cloverleaf Elementary, Rhodes School for the Performing Arts, Purple Sage Elementary, and Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy. What emerged was a community-wide championship that brought together students from across Houston, proving that academic excellence deserves a stage large enough for an entire city.

Host Phill Wade moved and grooved through the evening with the ease of someone who has run rooms before, keeping the energy alive between quarters while the crowd, pom-poms in hand, cheered on every student who stepped to the mic. What was remarkable, watching from the audience, was the camaraderie on the floor. These children had trained at different campuses, prepared under different coaches, and arrived as competitors. But the way they carried themselves around each other, the way they called out encouragement across the floor, felt less like a tournament and more like a team.

At halftime, the Rhodes School Drumline brought the audience to its feet. Student drummers, some carrying instruments that seemed nearly as large as they were, filled the Anderson Center with energy and precision, dazzling the crowd with a performance that commanded attention and set the tone for the competition's final stages.

Following the Third Quarter, Forward Times presented its inaugural Author of the Year Award to MR. TOMONOSHi, the creative persona of Super Bowl champion Martellus Bennett. A Houston-based author, philosopher, founder of Tomonoshi Publishing, and creator of *Hey A.J.*, the children's book series that evolved into an animated show on Disney Junior, Bennett has long championed creativity, imagination, and literacy. While many first came to know him through his accomplishments on the football field, his work as MR. TOMONOSHi has been dedicated to encouraging young people to embrace curiosity, storytelling, and the limitless possibilities of their own imagination.

The recognition marked the first time Forward Times had presented its Author of the Year Award and celebrated Bennett's contributions to literature, youth engagement, and creative expression.

He followed the presentation with a live performance of several original pieces that kept the audience balanced between laughter and reflection. His observations were sharp, culturally fluent, and delivered with the confidence of someone who understood exactly who was in the room. Certain lines landed with the kind of knowing laughter that only comes from shared experience. Others left the audience leaning forward, waiting for what might come next. The room received him the way communities receive people who have spent years doing the work and telling the truth with care.

The Word Was Grandiloquence

When the final quarter arrived, five students remained. Three quarters of competition whittled the field to one.

Journey Ards, contestant number 44, stepped to the mic. She had started preparing with Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy on June 9, just ten days before the competition. In those ten days, she studied some of the competition's most challenging words, woke her mother up at 10 p.m. to read word lists aloud, and carried a single lesson from Coach Victoria Brown into everything.

Brown, a Reading With A Rapper Edupreneur and STAR Academy instructor, coached students through both spelling preparation and the historical content that shaped the competition's Freedmen's Town trivia rounds. In the days leading up to Juneteenth, students didn't just learn vocabulary. They studied the history of Freedmen's Town itself, connecting language, culture, and local Black history in a way that brought the purpose of The BEE full circle.

"The first thing she said to us was to go up with confidence and know what you're spelling," Journey told *Forward Times* following her inaugural BEE championship victory. "Every single day we started and ended with saying, 'I am a champion,' and I kept that mindset into the competition."

The technique that got her through the hardest words was called chunking: breaking unfamiliar terms into pieces she already knew, then assembling them with trust. She applied it to every word the judges brought. She applied it to the winning word.

Grandiloquence. A word defined as a style of expression that is elaborate, lofty, and meant to impress. She spelled it without hesitation.

Journey was crowned The BEE's inaugural champion, earning a $1,000 Back-to-School Scholarship presented by Legends Do Live, The BEE Inaugural Championship Trophy presented by the VanVleet Family Foundation, and automatic placement in the 2027 edition of The BEE. The second- and third-place finishers each received championship medals and a Back-to-School sneaker shopping experience presented by Touching Soles.

But what landed hardest came after the trophy was in her hands, when she was asked what it meant to be an example for younger girls watching.

"I feel grateful. I grew up where my education and how educated I am was not appreciated. I was insulted, rather. And I am glad to be someone that little girls can see, and see that being smart and being educated is a good thing. It is something to be proud of. It is something that you should strive to be."



Forward Times Editor-in-Chief Lenora Small presents the inaugural Author of the Year Award to MR. TOMONOSHi.

What RWAR Built

The BEE was made possible through the support of partners who reflect the depth of what Reading With A Rapper has built over time: the NBA Foundation, Harris County Department of Education, Nike, the Fred VanVleet Family Foundation, Experian B.A.L.L. for Life, Forward Times, Legends Do Live, Houston Freedmen's Town Conservancy, Anderson Center for the Arts, OMG! Burger, Touching Soles, and Code BLK Productions.

The judges brought a combination of educational expertise, media leadership, and organizational stewardship to the competition. Lenora Small, Editor-in-Chief of Forward Times, served as Pronouncer; Grace Boateng, Creative Director and Lead Graphic Designer at Forward Times, served as Spelling Points Judge; Terrance Turner, Community Writer at Forward Times, served as Trivia Points Judge; and Takara Veazie, a Reading With A Rapper Edupreneur and one of the architects of The BEE, served as Head Judge and Official Scorekeeper.



Reading With A Rapper co-founders Douglas Johnson and Jarren Small articulated that vision in remarks shared ahead of The BEE.

"Today, Houston makes history," they said. "The BEE launches on Juneteenth, a day that marks the moment our ancestors claimed their freedom and a reminder of what we can build with that freedom today."

They described the competition as a commitment to creating opportunity, celebrating brilliance, and giving young people a stage worthy of their talent.

"The BEE is more than a competition," they said. "It's a tradition in the making, and we're just getting started."

Watching those jerseys move through the room, watching students step confidently to the microphone, watching parents in the stands wipe their eyes while their children cheered for someone else's kid, that sentiment rang true.

The BEE has just begun.

And Houston, clearly, was ready.

CLASSIFIEDS

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Information Technology (IT) Support and Network Management Services
Advertisement Forward Times

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)

The OST/Almeda Corridors Redevelopment Authority – TIRZ 7 ("Authority") is soliciting proposals from qualified Information Technology firms to provide comprehensive IT support, network management, cybersecurity, strategic technology planning, and related services.

Proposal Deadline:
June 29, 2026 at 3:00 PM (CDT)

Proposal documents and submission information may be obtained by downloading materials from www.ostalmeda.com under Public Notices & Events.

Questions regarding this solicitation must be submitted in writing to:
RFP@ostalmeda.com
tbrock@ostalmeda.com

The Authority reserves the right to reject any or all proposals and waive informalities in the best interest of the Authority.

HUB SUPPLIER OPPORTUNITY

Zenith Learning is bidding on Project 26-04-36 Addendum 1 (Student Services, Enrichment, Tutorials and Mentoring) for the Houston Independent School District. We are looking for possible HUB subcontractor(s) to provide the following services: enrichment classes. If you are interested in this opportunity, please contact our office by phone at 713-988-9600 and ask for Shelby.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL

Request for Proposal – Houston-Galveston Area Council – Community & Environmental – Livable Centers Study: Park Row – RFP-TRN26-03

H-GAC is seeking qualified contractor services to conduct a study and develop a plan to further the goals of the Livable Centers program in Harris County Precinct 4 (referred to as "sponsor" or "local sponsor" in this document). The Contractor will develop a plan that addresses the application of the Livable Centers program goals in the specified study area. Since this project requires a range of research, public engagement, transportation, and planning expertise, a team of specialized firms is permitted.

To view the solicitation documents, visit
https://www.h-gac.com/procurement or ESBD (txsmartbuy.com).

Response Deadline: July 23, 2026 @ 12:00 P.M. CT

REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL

Request for Proposal – Houston-Galveston Area Council – Enterprise Solutions – HGACBuy/Cooperative Purchasing Program – Modular Buildings, Shelters, and Structures – MB11-26

H-GAC is soliciting responses for selecting qualified manufacturers, distributors, installers and service providers of Modular Buildings, Shelters, and Structures, and to make these types of products and services available to Customers of the HGACBuy Cooperative Purchasing Program under blanket type contracts.

To view the solicitation documents, visit
https://www.h-gac.com/procurement or ESBD (txsmartbuy.com).

Response Deadline: July 30, 2026 @ 12:00 P.M. CT

INVITATION TO SUBMIT COMPETITIVE SEALED PROPOSAL

OST/Almeda Corridors Redevelopment Authority, COH TIRZ #7
3131 Emancipation Avenue, Suite 225, Houston, Texas 77004

Project Name: Griggs at MLK Median Improvement Project
Project CIP #T-0729
Project Location: Houston, TX
Estimated Construction Cost: $200,000
Bid Date and Time: 07/07/2026 @ 3:00 PM

Submit Proposals to projects@ostalmeda.com. Proposals will be accepted until 3:00 PM on the proposed date shown above. Proposals received after the deadline will not be accepted. Accepted proposals will be posted on www.ostalmeda.com by 07/07/2026 after the bid opening. A full bid tabulation will be posted after bids are reviewed and confirmed by the Owner. Although cost is a factor, proposals will be evaluated by other factors in addition to the cost. Lowest cost proposal does not guarantee selection of the proposer.

Copies of the CSP Documents may be obtained online at www.ostalmeda.com under Public Notices & Events. Contractors and the public must register on this website to view and/or download specifications and plans for this project. There is NO charge to view or download documents.

Proposers may submit questions to projects@ostalmeda.com. Addenda and other documents will be addressed and posted at www.ostalmeda.com.

The project consists of the renovation of one (1) median located nearest the intersection of Griggs Road and Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. The scope of work includes the following: removal and replacement of the existing concrete curb surrounding the median; installation of colored brick pavers at both ends of the existing median; installation of an automated irrigation system; and installation of landscaping and tree(s) as specified in the detailed drawings.

The Project includes City of Houston Standard Construction Specifications for Storm Drainage, Street Paving, and Traffic Control, which are incorporated into the Project.

These Standard Specifications, along with Standard Details, may be acquired at no cost on the City's website at https://www.houstonpermittingcenter.org/office-city-engineer/design-and-construction-standards.

Proposers shall comply with City Ordinance 2013-0428, Chapter 12, Article C, City of Houston Code of Ordinance's, as amended, and City of Houston Office of Business Opportunity Minority, Women, and Small Business Enterprise (MWSBE) Procedures. Bid bond in the amount not less than five percent (5%) of the total amount of the cost proposal must accompany each proposal as a guarantee that the selected proposer will enter into a proper contract and execute bonds and guaranties on the forms provided within (10) days after the date contract documents are received by the selected proposer.

Pre-proposal Meeting: An optional pre-proposal meeting will be held on Thursday, 07/02/2026 at 3:30 PM CST at 3131 Emancipation Ave., Suite 225, Houston, TX 77004. Attendees have the option to attend in-person or on Teams. The meeting link will be posted at www.ostalmeda.com.

The last date for bidders to submit questions is Monday, 07/06/2026 at 3:00 PM.

Contact with Authority staff or engineers/consultants with regards to this project is not permitted and will disqualify the bidder. All communications should be by email to:

Projects@OSTAlmeda.com

Mr. Hexser Holliday
Director of Capital Projects Planning and Development
OST/Almeda Corridors Redevelopment Authority TIRZ #7
Email: Projects@OSTAlmeda.com

LEGAL NOTICE

The Houston Independent School District Purchasing Services Department located at 4400 West 18th Street, Houston, TX 77092 is soliciting Request for Proposals (RFP) via the District's electronic bidding portal. Proposers may login to view specifications and submit their responses at the following link https://houstonisd.ionwave.net/Login.aspx until 11:00 a.m. (CST) Monday, June 30, 2026, for the following solicitation:

RFP 26-05-35 Kitchen Manager's HACCP Logbooks

Pre-proposal conferences via Microsoft Teams will be held in conjunction with this RFP. Information regarding dates, times, and instructions to receive a link to join the meeting can be located within the electronic bidding portal under the "Event Details" tab specific to this solicitation.

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS

Website Redesign and Development Services
Advertisement Forward Times

REQUEST FOR PROPOSALS (RFP)

OST/Almeda Corridors Redevelopment Authority and Reinvestment Zone Number Seven, City of Houston, Texas (TIRZ No. 7) is soliciting proposals from qualified firms to provide Website Redesign and Development Services for the Authority's public-facing website, www.ostalmeda.com.

The project includes website redesign, ADA accessibility compliance, content management system implementation, mobile optimization, and related support services intended to improve public communication, transparency, and community engagement.

Proposal Deadline:
July 01, 2026 at 5:00 PM (CDT)

Proposal documents and submission information may be obtained by downloading materials from www.ostalmeda.com under Public Notices & Events.

Questions regarding this solicitation must be submitted in writing to:
RFP@ostalmeda.com

The Authority reserves the right to reject any or all proposals and waive informalities in the best interest of the Authority.