

Student program aims to shift racial images

BY MICHELE MUNZ
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Ladue Horton Watkins High School junior Ben Solomon, who is Jewish, spent Sunday morning at Fresh Start Bible Church in north St. Louis, where the congregation was hugging, dancing and singing enthusiastically. Everyone was given a notebook and told to get five others to write a compliment in it.

"I come from an orthodox synagogue, and the key word is orthodox. This was completely unorthodox... I've never experienced anything like that in my life, seeing people so passionate and charismatic," said Solomon, who worships at B'nai Amoona. "I've been taught about other beliefs and history, but to actually experience their church and their religion really did change me a lot. More than any education could."

Solomon was among 24 high school juniors who attended the service as part of a youth leadership program aimed at dispelling stereotypes and promoting respect and understanding between blacks and Jews, two groups paired through history in

civil rights struggles. The non-profit program, called Cultural Leadership, involves students from 15 public and private schools in St. Louis and St. Louis County.

The group met for the first time Friday, the start of a three-day retreat that included exercises to get to know each other, seminars on each group's history and synagogue and church services. They will continue activities through the year and travel to several U.S. cities with historical significance this summer. Their parents must meet every six weeks as well. In their senior year, they will facilitate discussions at school or church and speak about their experience.

The program was started by St. Louis resident Karen Kalish and modeled after a program she founded in Washington.

On Friday night, the group attended a service at Central Reform Congregation, led by Rabbi Susan Talve. They were told by facilitators to sit black, Jew, black, Jew. But during their discussion Sunday afternoon, they didn't need to be told. They nudged and whispered jokes to each other like lifelong friends.

"When I first came (to the retreat), everyone was separated with the black kids in one corner and the white kids in another. And I thought, 'Oh, I see how this is going to be, just like at school,'" said Clarissa Polk, who attends John Burroughs School and Pleasant Green Baptist Church. "But the next day, everyone was together in a big circle. It was great."

They learned it was OK to say black instead of African-American. They learned Jews don't control the media and Hollywood. And in a moment between planned activities, they played duck, duck, goose.

On Sunday, St. Louis County Executive Charlie A. Dooley and Talve spoke to the group and praised them as catalysts to promote understanding.

"These are our leaders," Dooley said. "These are the individuals that are going to bring what our generation couldn't bring to America, to rid this country of discrimination and prejudice."

And with the weekend coinciding with celebrations of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, Talve borrowed the civil rights leader's words: "You are going to be the ones to bring us closer to the promised land."

Reporter Michele Munz
E-mail: mmunz@post-dispatch.com
Phone: 314-340-8263

The youth leadership program hopes to dispel stereotypes and promote respect and understanding.