



"There's a bond between us now"

By sharing Seder, Easter services, students experience cultural enrichment first-hand



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On the second night of Passover, Jordan Williams and Thomas Bullock marked the Jewish holiday with family and friends at a traditional Seder.

Three days later, Nina Oberman sat in the pew of The Village Church of St. Louis for an Easter service.

On the surface, neither celebration seems remarkable: except Jordan and Thomas

are African-American Christians and Nina is white and Jewish.

The experience for the three teenagers is one of many ways that Cultural Leadership of St. Louis is working to foster understanding and promote social activism among high school students from two diverse ethnic groups.

"A lot of time, prejudices are so ingrained that people treat them like a joke," said Nina, 16, a junior at Clayton High School. "I've learned to take them a lot more seriously. There are racial divisions, and if we really want to make changes, we have to learn to listen and understand each other."

Thomas, 16, a junior at Ladue Horton Watkins High School, and Jordan, 16, a junior at Cardinal Ritter College Prep High School in St. Louis, and their families joined Nina and her parents, Todd Oberman and Laura Davis, Nina's two siblings and other family members at their Clayton home for Passover Seder.

It was Jordan's first time at a Jewish celebration, just as it was Nina's first time experiencing Easter in a black Christian church. Thomas previously attended Seders because of his older brother and sister's participation in Cultural Leadership.

"This is very different for me," Jordan said. "But although we have different customs and faiths, in many ways the African-American and Jewish experience is the same."

All three teens pointed out that Jewish and African-American peoples have been enslaved, have experienced discrimination and racial hatred, and historically have worked together for social justice.

"Everyone has experienced racism and stereotyping," Thomas said. "And everyone has to work together to change it."

Change was Karen Kalish's goal when she founded Cultural Leadership five years ago.

"There are lots of problems in this country, and we need a whole new generation of young people who can use leadership and social skills to stand up and speak out and who will not just talk about change, but make it happen," Kalish said. "We're building an army of racism eradicators."

Being a member of that army isn't easy.

Students must apply to the program. Cultural Leadership recruits sophomores and juniors from St. Louis area high schools and houses of worship. About half the students in the program are African-American; 40 percent are Jewish.

If their application is chosen, students first take part in a face-to-face interview. Kalish said only the students who demonstrate they're serious about the year-long commitment to Cultural Leadership are ultimately accepted into the program.

It's then that the real work begins.

Students take part in monthly programs, such as attendance at a worship service other than their own, but Kalish said they also must be actively involved in promoting change in their school and community.

"Every month, they have to do something that takes them outside their comfort zone — confront a bully, sit at the black or the white table at school, address a racial remark — do something to generate awareness and start a dialogue," Kalish said.

The teens must keep a running blog about their activities.

"If they don't, they're out of the

program," Kalish said. "This is what we're about."

During the summer, the students take part in a 24-day multi-state trip during which they'll interact with 76 different speakers, community leaders who talk to them about racial and religious divides and the efforts to close them.

For the teens who take part, the year they spend in the program is life-altering.

"It's definitely changed my life," Jordan said. "In learning about other cultures, you learn about yourself and you develop a whole new perspective. For me, it won't stop when my year is over. No matter what I decide to do in my life, it will involve continuing to work for change."

Nina said her experience in Cultural Leadership has opened her eyes.

"I've learned it's hard to be black in America today, and that there are things my peers go through that I never considered before," she said. "It's made me determined to make a difference, here and nationwide."

"There's a bond between us now," Thomas said. "We've all made commitments to work together."

And that, ultimately, is Kalish's goal.

"Cultural Leadership isn't about hope," she said. "It's about action, and these kids are going to lead the way."

For more information about Cultural Leadership: Visit the web at: www.culturalleadership.com

Call: (314) 725-3222

E-mail: Karen Kalish, executive director, executivedirector@culturalleadership.com

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