



Multi-state trip a social learning experience for students

Group's goal is to bridge racial divide



JULY 13, 2009 12:00 AM • BY DANETTE THOMPSON

To learn to build bridges, 30 area high school students recently traveled hundreds of miles.

The 24-day, multi-state trip brought youths with diverse backgrounds face-to-face with some of the most powerful and poignant images and memories of prejudice and the fight to overcome it. And then, putting them together with community activists, it challenged them to take the lead in closing racial and religious divides.

"It wasn't just a trip," said Drake Hall, a senior at Webster Groves High School. "It was a transformational journey. It made us look at ourselves, who we are, where we came from, and the impact other people have had on our lives."

The trip was part of Cultural Leadership's continuing work to promote social activism among high school students.

Karen Kalish of Clayton started Cultural

Leadership five years ago because she believes ending discrimination and achieving social justice lies with a new generation of young leaders.

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

The students make a year-long commitment that includes a variety of programs and active involvement in promoting change in their school and community. The three-week summer trip is one of the most intense Cultural Leadership experiences: 15 cities and towns, 76 speakers, dozens of stops, all in about three weeks.

"The kids are exposed to many different people with diverse points of view," Kalish said. "I urge them to walk in those moccasins, to see what it feels like and not totally dismiss a viewpoint, even if it's one that's diametrically opposed to what they believe. We need to keep listening because that's how we find areas where we can agree."

The trip took the students from St. Louis to New York, Washington D.C., and then south to Georgia, Alabama, the Mississippi Delta, Little Rock, Ark., and Memphis, Tenn.

Their journey was a study in contrasts. The group revisited past struggles at museums and historic sites and talked about current battles with legislators on Capitol Hill. They walked the streets of Harlem and roads in Greenwood, Miss., met with African-American activists, Jewish leaders and the head of the conservative Heritage Foundation.

"I learned to see things from a much different perspective," said Kristen Ingram of John Burroughs School.

"Sometimes it was hard to listen to what people had to say. There are some truths you don't want to admit to. But we all need to hear them if we're going to make changes."

Hayley Levy of Ladue Horton Watkins High said she thought she knew about civil rights history.

"But after I walked in those places, talked with people who lived through those events, I didn't really understand," she said. "And it's important that we understand the past if we're going to change the future."

Shayna Rosen of Parkway North High said, "I don't see how people can say we're living in a post-racial society when you see how divided we are by neighborhoods and class structure."

This is the first year that white Christian students - three of the 30 - have accompanied African-American and Jewish kids on the trip.

"It doesn't happen often that I'm the minority," said Winona Hawker-Boehnke of Webster Groves High. "I admit I was a little nervous at the start. But after the first night, when everyone was so open and welcoming, it didn't matter. I came away from this realizing that I'm not alone. Everyone here is just a phone call or a text away. We're in this together."

Terrell Gilkey of SIUE East St. Louis Charter School, said, "When you're in high school, you don't stop to realize that there's a bigger picture. More people need to do this, get outside their world, outside their comfort zone."

Change is up to people who see problems and have the courage to take action, said Ashanti Hall of Mary Institute Country Day School.

"You can live for yourself or you can live to help others," she said. "If we want to

make sure the future is a better place for everyone, when we see a problem, we have to step up, grab and ally or two and get to work."

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