

Cultural Leadership pairs and teaches black and Jewish youth

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Rebecca S. Rivas Of The St. Louis American

Jordan Williams, age 17, remembers when he first met the other 29 teens.

It was at a weekend retreat in January. Williams, a Cardinal Ritter College Prep senior, couldn't imagine ever fitting in with the mix of mainly black and Jewish high school students.

Williams' guidance counselor recommended that he join Cultural Leadership, a program that trains teens – mostly black or Jewish – to be leaders in social justice.

“My counselor told me it would help me find myself,” Williams said.

“My first day at the January retreat, I had my doubts about the program. I didn't understand why I was there.”

Now more than 10 months later, Williams can't imagine loving a group of diverse people more.

“I can look to them for anything,” he said. “That's what it's all about is having allies to achieve what you want to accomplish.”

For one year, the Cultural Leadership teens meet successful activists of social justice, travel around the country visiting places that have civil rights significance, and exchange cultural holidays and experiences.

To enter the program, students like Williams had to fill out an extensive application – and the deadline for applying for next year's program is November 13. Next week, on October 14 at 7 p.m., program coordinators will hold an informational meeting at the

Central Reform Congregation, 5020 Waterman Blvd., for “curious and courageous” teens who are interested in applying.

The opening weekend retreat – the one Williams felt nervous about – begins on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and it sets the foundation of the group's yearlong goals.

Then from January to June, the students meet monthly to learn about the history, culture and contemporary issues affecting African Americans and Jews. Students explore what it means for them to become change agents.

“I used to think leaders had to be giant figures who had thousands of followers,” Williams said.

“But Cultural Leadership made me realize that you can make as much of a change as the next person –

as long as you can find people who feel the same as you do.”

In January, the group travels to New York City, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Birmingham, Montgomery, New Orleans and several cities in Mississippi, visiting people, museums and organizations dedicated to social change.

“It’s hard work,” said Karen Kalish, the program founder and director. “These kids aren’t going to Graceland to see Elvis.”

Kalish said they are having serious conversations with people who are making a significant contribution to improving society.

“Standing in front of the White House” was the first thing that came to Terrell Gilkey’s mind when he thought of the program’s most impressionable moments. On the trip, they listened to over 60 speakers, traveled from place to place, went to museums and read about history.

Gilkey, age 17 and a student at SIUE East St. Louis Charter School, said the 300 mandatory program hours is rigorous. “But the entire program is worth it,” Gilkey said.

Janetta Roberts, a participating mother, said she first read about the program in The St. Louis American when she was waiting for her daughter to get out of school. She called the organization to get an application for her daughter, Reneasha Ford.

Ford, the only participant going to a St. Louis Public School, filled out the application herself. Though she had moments when she thought it was difficult, she persevered, Roberts said.

Now Roberts has noticed that her daughter is more outspoken about injustices, she said.

“It’s a program that will open your eyes,” Roberts said.

“As a parent, I can see where the kids have a bond even though they don’t get to see each other all the time. That diversity is important in our kids’ lives.”

Now the students are in the last phase of program, which involves learning facilitation, community organizing and using the media to bring about social change.

The students take on a more visible leadership role in their schools, churches, synagogues and other venues to facilitate discussions about social justice issues.

Or, as Kalish said, “We are building an army of racism eradicators.”

At this point, students are learning how to put to action the program’s motto: when you see a problem, “grab an ally, or two or three, roll up your sleeves and get to work.”