

Toronto Children's Aid youth visit Washington, DC

For five days in August, a group of young people between the ages of 14 and 17 who are involved with the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, traveled to Washington, DC on a 'Soul Journey'.

The Soul Journey trips are an initiative of CAS Toronto's Black Education Awareness Committee which is made up of staff, volunteers and foster parents of CAS Toronto. They help to organize educational and cultural awareness trips and learning opportunities for Black children and youth involved with the Society.

Previous Soul Journey trips have included Africville in Halifax, N.S. and Uncle Tom's Cabin near Chatham, Ontario.

The following article was written by a youth who participated in this summer's excursion.

By TROY ELLESTON

Having to finish my Grade 11 year while preparing for the Soul Journey trip to D.C. was not easy. I was so excited.

After the completion of the school year, I became anxious, knowing that the trip was a month away. I had never been out of the country before. My family was a huge help in assisting me to prepare for the experience. The week prior to the trip, I thought about what it was going to be like being away from them for a week; not just a city or a province away, but in another country.

On the morning that we left, as I was about to board the bus, I looked around and saw other youth, CAS staff and chaperones all around, many of whom I didn't know. A 12-hour bus ride to Washington was about to change that.

On the excursion, 35 youth, myself included, got the opportunity of a lifetime to see the sites of America's capital city. The Lincoln Memorial, Capitol Hill, the White



House, the National Mall, the Smithsonian Institute, the African-American Art and Civil War museums were each a wonder to visit.

All of these places impressed me with their authenticity and their history. I am blessed to have seen these sites for the first time with so many other youth my age. After visiting a few museums, I can say that I, like many of the youth who visited them, were truly changed by seeing the sculptures, paintings and sketching done by African and other American men and women. Their art moved all of us as we debated what message the piece was attempting to communicate.

We also witnessed the not so subtle racial division in America and how this dichotomy is reflected in that society. We met and spoke with people just like ourselves who could barely maintain shelter in a country as racially diverse and wealthy as America. Not far from the White House, was a ghetto neighbourhood, a shocking testament to the divisions in the country. Quite different from

the life we are accustomed to in Toronto.

Another big thrill was visiting Howard University, one of the most prominent and prestigious Black institutions in the United States. We were fortunate to meet a professor who spoke to us about her 20-year career as a teacher. She was a joyful, enthusiastic, middle aged Black woman who spoke to us about youth in America and the increasing number of Black youth attending university. She told us how fortunate we were to have the opportunity to visit, and encouraged us to work hard in school and make the best impression possible on our teachers and our friends.

Her talk was both encouraging and inspiring. Much of what she said has proved beneficial to me, particularly now in Grade 12, as we study the social divisions in America and their current affairs.

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I feel proud that, while my class discusses issues relevant to these divisions, I had the opportunity of traveling to the U.S. to see and hear the perspective of people who live there.

It is overwhelming to know that the freedoms and rights that we enjoy are because of the sacrifices of our forefathers. I now have a deeper appreciation for Black history because of the sacrifices made by those who came before me; the struggles they endured for our freedom, the abuse they suffered simply for being Black and then eventually breaking free of the grip of slavery.

I am also proud to be a descendant of those freedom fighters and respect them because it was through their collective brotherhood that they were able to overcome the negativity that surrounded them. What disappoints me is that I don't see that same brotherhood among Black people today. I find it disheartening that when one of us

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does well at something, another one of us is there envying them instead of supporting and congratulating them.

When our brothers and sisters achieve something as important as scoring well on a school test, we should congratulate them and use that as motivation to do better ourselves. We should all strive to achieve more than what is expected of us. United we stand, divided we fall.

During our time in Washington, we also had the opportunity to spend an afternoon with a group of youth who, like ourselves, are involved with the local child welfare agency. Things are very different in D.C. for these youth. They do not have as many privileges or opportunities as we have. They explained to us, for example, how difficult it would be for them to arrange a similar trip to Toronto and how lucky we were to have such an opportunity.

After listening to the story of one 18-year-old girl involved with the Washington CAS, we were gripped by the tragic reality of her young life. She had been abandoned by the family who adopted her at the age of two. This brought me to the realization that our time is short and not all of us are given equal opportunities to make a difference. We need to take life and the opportunities presented to us much more seriously.

This 'Soul Journey' trip gave me the opportunity to see and better understand the struggles and accomplishments of Black America, which helped me to grow as an individual. However, listening to the many stories about their issues, I was left concerned – and inspired.

Three words that found their way into most of the discussions that we had were faith, hope and opportunity. These words stuck with me because of their deep and profound association with the struggles that the pioneers of Black America endured.

After leaving Washington, I refused to accept the tragic scenario that some Black people embrace – that we need to fail in order to succeed. As a result of the 'Soul Journey' excursion, I came to understand that my own life experiences, struggles and outcomes contribute to the cultural experience of the Black community in which I live and, most importantly, that I can and will succeed.