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Students battle racism

Participants praise Cultural Leadership program

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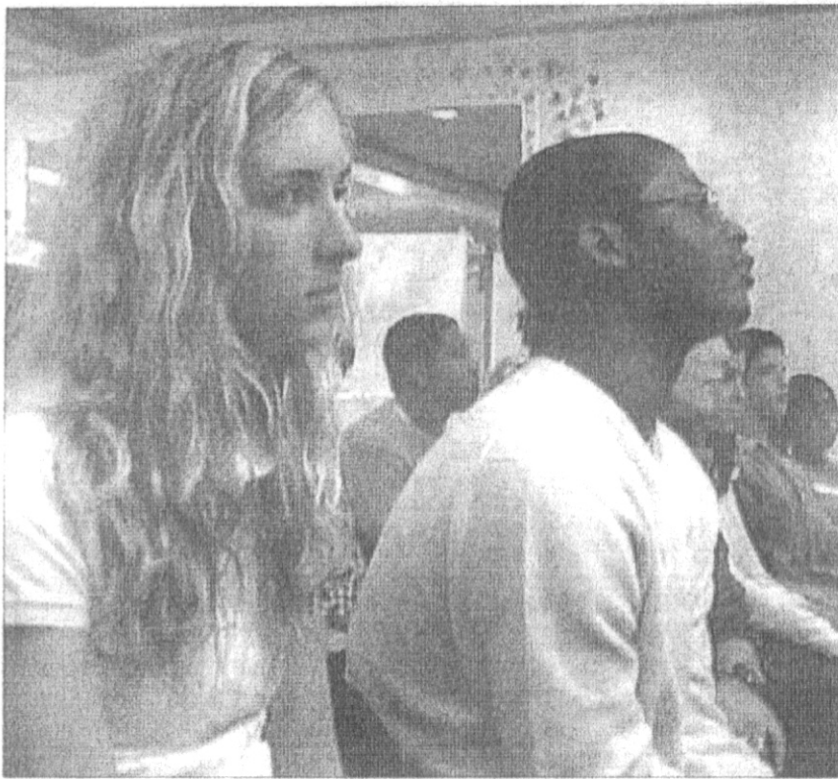
The dream of a racism-free world is indeed a grand vision. However, University City High School junior Terry Burstein is not quite sure the goal will be achievable in the near future.

"There is a possibility and I hope that it (racism) does end, but realistically, I don't think it will happen in my lifetime," he said.

Nevertheless, that has not stopped Karen Kalish from founding a yearlong educational leadership program called Cultural Leadership. Made up of 24 St. Louis area high school juniors of Jewish and/or African descent — including Burstein — the goal of the nonprofit organization is for the students to learn about their own race, religion and cultural history.

"That's the short-term goal," Kalish said. "The long-term goal is to end racism in their lifetimes."

Racism: Participants praise program



RYAN HEINZ PHOTO

Clayton High School junior Ellie Warshaw, left, Webster Groves High School junior Reggie Jones and other students participating in Cultural Leadership listen to a guest speaker at the conclusion of a weekend retreat in St. Louis.

A native of St. Louis, Kalish returned to the area in 2001 after living in Washington, D.C., Chicago and Cambridge, Mass., for a combined 37 years. While in Washington, D.C., she formed a program in 1994 called Operation Understand D.C. (OUDC), which was inspired by a Philadelphia-based program started in 1985.

Since then, Kalish often has been asked to replicate her OUDC program in other cities. However, she soon discovered her own home of St. Louis could use such a program.

"Racism and feminism and discrimination are alive and well in the country, but especially in this city," Kalish said. "We have been called the fourth-most segregated city in America, and race is the number one issue here."

She felt the best way to tackle this problem was with young people. But why are the young people participating in Cultural Leadership relegated to African-Americans and Jews? According to a Cultural Leadership statement, the two groups have a rich history of overcoming civil rights obstacles — many times by banding together to do so.

"No two groups have had a greater effect on America, and we want to continue that tradition," Kalish said.

The 24 students participating in Cultural Leadership were recruited from 130 public and private high schools and 65 churches and synagogues

throughout St. Louis and St. Louis County. The result, Kalish said, is the "creme de la creme" of the area's youth.

One student, Reggie Jones, who attends Webster Groves High School, said he wants to someday help dispel the stereotypes that come with cultural ignorance.

"This program can be a model to help get other programs started, and it'll include all cultures and all religions and all races, and hopefully one day it'll become a better world," he said.

Essentially, the yearlong Cultural Leadership program is broken down into three parts.

From now through June, the students will meet a minimum of once a month for classes and cultural activities.

Then the students will take a three-week trip in summer to places in the U.S. significant to both the African-American and Jewish communities. These places include New York City; Washington, D.C. (where they will meet with students in OUDC); Atlanta; several cities in Alabama and Mississippi; and Memphis, Tenn.

For the final portion of the program, the students will spend the first half of their senior year in leadership training, doing public-speaking engagements, facilitating discussions on racial issues and fund raising.

Ellie Warshaw, a junior at Clayton High School, hopes to someday be able to improve race relations based on what she learns from the experience.

"This is such an amazing group of people, and they're all so dedicated to it that if they put their minds to it, they can definitely change some things," she said.

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