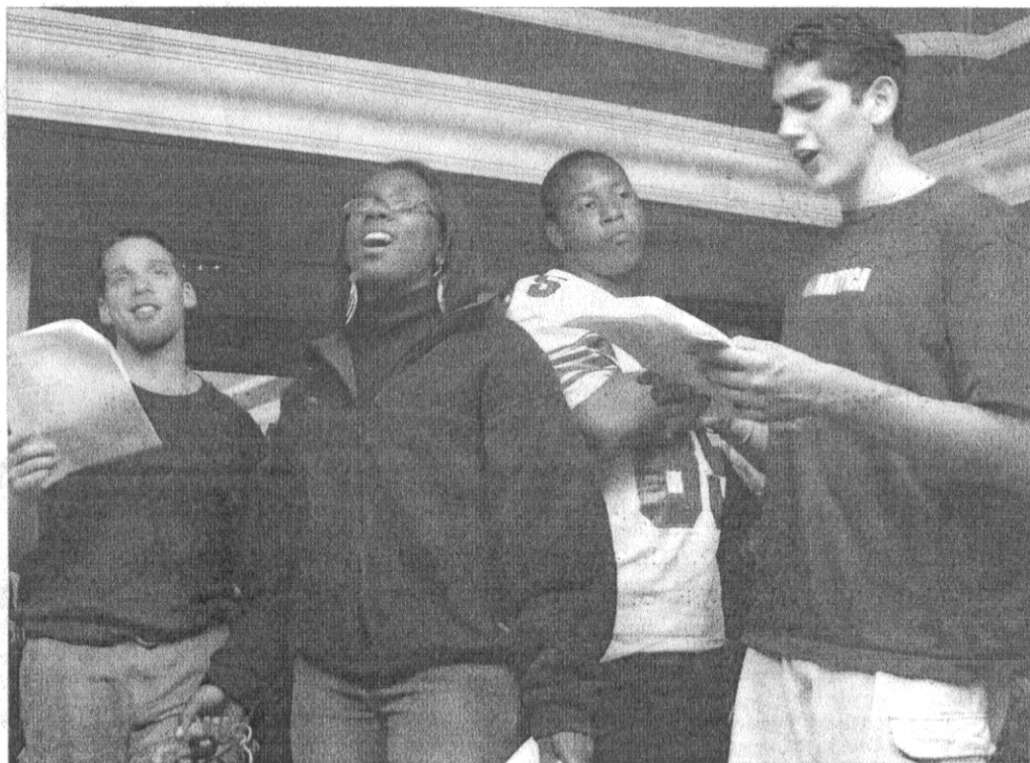


## CULTURAL LEADERSHIP | PROGRAM BRINGS JEWISH, BLACK STUDENTS TOGETHER



**DIVERSITY** From left to right: Noam Osband, Clarissa Polk, Blake Harris, and Matthew Kleiman. Osband and Kleiman are our Jewish boys and Polk and Harris represent Missionary Baptist Churches. Photo: Dennis Caldwell

## Creating an army against racism

BY VICTORIA SIEGEL  
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH LIGHT

*"All Jews are doctors, lawyers or accountants."*

*"If I see a group of black kids hanging around the mall, I get scared."*

*"Since Jews are white, they don't experience discrimination like black people do."*

These statements are just some of the comments that a diverse group of curious, mature and open-minded African-American and Jewish high school students had to listen to as part of a new program to dismantle racism and discrimination.

The program, called Cultural Leadership, was created by Karen Kalish and had its inaugural event in January of this year.

Cultural Leadership (CL) is a year-long program that trains select black and Jewish high school juniors to become change agents of social justice through educational classes and facilitated discussions, cultural activities, dialogue sessions, travel and study programs, public speaking, and leadership training. Interested students went through a vigorous application process, including a written application, essays, personal interviews, and two recommendations, in order to be selected for this program.

"I heard an announcement about this program at my school, Metro High School," explained Matt Kleiman from B'nai Amoona. "I put a lot of time and thought into my application. Even though my school is diverse we still have black kids sitting together and white kids sitting together. I wanted to learn how to integrate my class."

CL, which is made up of 23 teenagers (13 black, 10 Jewish; 11 boys, 12 girls) kicked off its first year in St. Louis on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday with a weekend-long retreat in January. The students, along with trained facilitators, held discussions and participated in activities designed to open communication among the participants. The students also attended Shabbat services at Central Reform Congregation and Sunday services at Fresh Start Bible Church.

In February, they visited the Missouri Historical Society Museum to study the transatlantic slave trade; in March, they went to Hillel to learn about Jewish history and enjoyed Israeli dancing. The April event had them examining institutional racism, power, and prejudice so they can begin to understand how America works in order to remove racism in their lifetime. They also learned how

to step dance, a type of dance that is an integral part of black fraternities and sororities and has its roots in African culture. Through activities such as these, the students are learning about their own and each other's religion, race, culture and history.

"I did not know that the Jewish people had experienced slavery, too," said Lydia Pruitt, a student from Cardinal Ritter High School. "Now in this group I am starting to see the barriers breaking down. We have more things in common than we don't."

Lydia has been so changed by this experience that, having attended all black schools from grade school on, she wants to attend a mixed college. "Going to an all-black college would be taking a step backward for me," she said.

Kleiman added: "I have learned how blacks and Jews are tied together through slavery and the civil rights movement." He admits that the intense curriculum can be challenging but he feels his goals will be met. "The way to change society is to talk and let people know the truth."

Blake Harris, a student at Saint Louis Priory School, said that some of his classmates look at him as the "token black student."

But after participating in CL, he

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was surprised to learn that white people, Jews, are discriminated against too.

"I thought all white people weren't repressed," he admitted. Now, even after only participating in CL since January he is already changing. "I'm not generalizing about people so much," he said.

But the students aren't the only people who are touched by this program: their parents also get involved by meeting every six weeks to share experiences and issues.

For example, during one session, the parents watched a video of a program aired on 20/20 several years ago that pointed out the discrimination many blacks face. The program followed two single men, one black and one white, in St. Louis as they looked for jobs, hunted for places to rent, and bought a car. Even though both men had the same education, same career, same recommendations and same dress, the white man had no difficulty securing all of these.

**"We look for kids who are eager to learn, are sensitive to the realities around them, and are eager to receive things that most teens wouldn't."**

— *Doug Petty, CL board member and Pastor of Fresh Start Bible Church*

Both parents and kids must sign a paper indicating their understanding of how demanding CL is. The kids must be mature enough to want to be change agents and must have supportive parents.

"We look for kids who are eager to learn, are sensitive to the realities around them, and are eager to receive things that most teens wouldn't," said Doug Petty, CL board member and pastor of Fresh Start Bible Church.

As part of CL, the students take an attitude survey before and after their participation in the program.

There is also a program evaluator at each event to observe and interview students. His job is to evaluate CL against its goals and objectives.

The rest of this year will be a very busy one for the students.

They will participate in another retreat at the end of April where they will learn about the civil rights movement. Before the retreat they must pair up with another CL student and do research on people who were involved in the movement from the Little Rock Nine to John Lewis to Mahatma Ghandi whose ideals of non-violent protest formed the core of Dr. King's philosophy.

For three weeks in June and July, they will travel around parts of the United States to visit sites relevant to the African-American and Jewish experiences including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. and Selma, Alabama. In September they will visit black and Jewish sights in St. Louis.

As Kalish puts it, "We want to make a whole army of racism eradicators!"

For more information about Cultural Leadership, visit [www.culturalleadership.com](http://www.culturalleadership.com) or call 314-725-3222.