

Black, Jewish youths joined by civil rights tour



Karen Kalish, center, led a group of black and Jewish students through Montgomery and Selma this weekend. Members of the group, which spent part of Saturday at Temple Mishkan Israel in Selma, are, from left, Maayan Simckes, Terry Burstein, Reggie Jones and Patrick Haynie.

History spans teens' culture gap

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Jews and blacks formed a powerful civil rights coalition during the 1960s, but strained relations since that time have had leaders of both groups looking for ways to mend old wounds.

Karen Kalish took one of the first steps in that direction more than 10 years ago when she formed Operation Understanding DC, a Washington, D.C., based biracial youth group aimed at forming friendships between Jews and blacks.

Members of her newest group — "Cultural Leadership" — spent the past few days touring civil rights sites in Alabama and learning more about each other.

"I knew about the civil rights movement, but I had no idea how much it was influenced by Jewish people and how much they have helped us," said Jasmine Furr, 17, who is one of the black teenagers on the tour.

The St. Louis-based group included 21 black and Jewish students who quickly became friends and sought to learn more about each other.

"We are the two quintes-



Ellie Warshaw, left, and Jasmine Furr, both of St. Louis tour Temple Mishkan Israel.

sential victims," Kalish said. "Terrible things have happened to us through the years."

The group spent Friday in Montgomery, where they toured the Dexter Avenue-King Memorial Baptist Church and Rosa Parks Museum and spoke with officials from the Southern Poverty Law Center, Temple Beth Or and Holt Street Baptist Church.

On Saturday in Selma, they toured Temple Mishkan Israel, a Jewish house of worship, and the

National Voting Rights Museum.

Mishkan Israel President Ed Ember, who has addressed several biracial groups in recent years, again outlined his synagogue's history and the challenges it has been facing.

"We've had one or two groups every summer for the past five years," Ember said. "This is the first time we've had a group from St. Louis. Some have come down following the voting rights trail and stop here."

The teenagers learned about how blacks and Jews worked hard to erase barriers to basic civil rights 40 years ago. Three civil rights activists murdered in Mississippi in 1964 included two Jews and a black man.

They also learned that some things apparently still need work — including inclusion of Jews in the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Montgomery bus boycott.

Kalish, who said she has followed the progress of graduates from her programs in Washington and St. Louis, indicated her concern today extends far beyond her original intent.

"I'm worried about institutional racism, power and privilege," she said. "I want these young people to know the bigger issues that confront them and to be change agents."

Kalish said she has kept tabs on those who enrolled in the programs through the years and found "they have, for the most part, gone into helping professions."

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"They're into prison reform programs. They work in rape crisis centers and inner city schools," she said. "Very few have gone to Wall Street."

Kalish said it cost about \$50,000 for the ongoing trip, which moves into Mississippi and other southern states in the coming week. She said her group has received foundation grants

as well as private donations. A \$40,000 two-year grant came from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation.

The trip, which began on June 16 in New York City, was a no-frills excursion through southern states where civil rights history was made. Kalish said the intent was to learn, not indulge in shopping sprees.

"We're not having one fancy meal on this trip," she said. "There's no shopping, no Empire

State Building, no Graceland. They are on this trip to learn more about human rights, civil rights and social injustice."

Furr indicated that times have changed from days when northern activists worried about getting back home alive after forays into Alabama and Mississippi in the 1960s.

"My mom was worried, but not about the South," she said. "She was just worried that I'd be gone from home so long."