

Program teaches black, Jewish teens about their similar pasts

By Kara Beightel

The minds of 21 area teenagers are still reeling after a three-week trip that took them to some of the landmarks of the civil rights movement, as well as to U.S. memorials of the Holocaust.

"It's been magnificent," said Patrick Haynie, one of those who took the trip, just hours after the travelers returned to St. Louis July 8.

The teenagers are all part of the first class of Cultural Leadership, a program that brings black and Jewish teenagers together to learn about each other and their cultural histories.

"Our mission is simple, ambitious and vital," said Karen Kalish, founder and executive director of Cultural Leadership. "We aim to bring these young people together again to dispel stereotypes and promote cooperation, mutual respect, dialogue and understanding. We are preparing them to promote interracial harmony and respect for diversity, and eradicate racism by building a positive coalition between two groups."

Along with Kalish, eight Jewish teens and 13 black youths went on the field trip, which took them from the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., where the decision was made to begin the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. The teenagers also met many people who participated in the civil rights movement, as well as some Holocaust survivors.

"Ten years from now, some of these people won't be around to tell these stories," said participant Scott Friedman of the Holocaust survivors and civil rights workers they met on the trip. "It means



Marian Brickner photo

Cultural Leadership participants Clarissa Polk (left) and Ellie Warshaw discuss their trip to civil rights sites and Holocaust memorials as Ellie's mother, Susan Warshaw, looks on.

so much to hear it from them and to feel their emotions."

One of the civil rights activists the teenagers got to know quite well during the trip was Frank Robinson, their bus driver. Robinson had participated in nonviolent protests in the South during the civil rights movement and, over the three weeks on the road with Cultural Leadership, told the teenagers about being called names, yelled at and spit upon during the protests.

Haynie said the trip opened his eyes to a lot of disturbing revelations, including the fact that Adolf Hitler copied the U.S. segregation policies when he began ostracizing Jews during the Holocaust.

Haynie said he was unaware of the fact that Jewish and black people banded together so tightly during the civil rights movement. The southern Jewish population was instrumental in fighting

for black rights during the movement, Haynie said.

"It was a people's movement, not just a black movement," Haynie said. "And Jews were our biggest allies."

During a meeting just after they got off the bus in St. Louis, all of the participants called the trip a life-changing experience. Take Rachel Marschke, for example.

Prior to her involvement in Cultural Leadership, Marschke considered herself an open-minded person who respected all walks of life, although she admitted that she didn't know much

about black culture. Of the 70 students in her class at a small private school, only five are black.

But she said Cultural Leadership and the trip in particular have changed what she knows about black culture.

"We're all allies for each other," she said, adding that although she knows she'll never fully be able to empathize with some of her new friends about their cultural history, "I can put myself in their place and sympathize with them."

The trip marks the midpoint of the yearlong Cultural Leadership program, which is based at Central Reform Congregation. The teens met for the first time at a retreat over Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend and have gotten together once a month since then for daylong meetings or events.

Now that the three-week field trip is over, the 21 teenagers will spend the rest of their time in the program learning how to get their message out, in both their schools and the community. In December, they graduate from the program.

Haynie said he and his new friends would start small to communicate what they have learned, starting in their schools. "We'll have to set up goals and take baby steps," he said. "There's so much that impacts us directly."

Echoed Friedman, "We've changed ourselves, now we just have to spread the word." **W**