

YOUTH NEWS August 25, 2016

Reports from the YOUTH PERSPECTIVE TRIP to DC

We took off early Saturday morning, July 31st on a bus provided by Amtrak (due to construction between Windsor Locks and New Haven). In New Haven we boarded a train to DC, caught the Metro in Union Station, and then rolled our suitcases through city blocks to George Washington University, where we would be staying. Fortunately for us the weather was beautiful for our week in DC. After settling into our rooms, we got acquainted with our trip families, found food close to campus and then started on a hike to the memorials: Lincoln, MLK, WWI, WWII Memorials, and a view of the Washington Monument. Each morning and evening we met in the basement for a group focus to reflect and prepare us for the experience of that day.

Monday was by far the most challenging perspective shift for most to embrace. We met at the historic Metropolitan AME church, first with a white activist group called Showing Up For Racial Justice. The young adult leaders took us through some interactive games meant to help us understand how white privilege can feel to less privileged minorities. After a pizza dinner and a tour of the historic church (which had been home to Frederick Douglas and Rosa Parks' memorial service), eight youth from Black Lives Matter arrived, joined by the AME church youth, and some local college students. The BLM team separated us by skin color, instructing us to answer the same questions in these groups. (This caucus style, while difficult for us, is often used to help empower minorities to speak their truth.) We learned about gentrification and how it (and other issues) affects the black community. After the discussion I stayed to talk with the church pastor and elders who indicated to me that it was a 'first' for their church, saying, "There have never been this many white people in our church!" and another, "This is what we need to be doing. White churches are talking to each other. And black churches talk to themselves, but we are not having conversations **together** like this! We are all in echo chambers – talking to ourselves, and that gets us nowhere."

On Tuesday we all headed off to different service sites – homeless shelters, breakfasts, an LGBT youth center, and food for people living with AIDS. In the evening we had an amazing spiritual experience with leaders from The Sanctuaries...one, a minister who was a cancer survivor and artist, the other a hip hop musician. Before the night was over we were all creating rap rhymes. They had taught us to reach inside and pull thoughts from our souls. It was impressive to hear our kids perform. Many of our guys and some of our girls continued writing rhymes throughout the week. Pretty cool.

On Wednesday we split into teams to provide yard-work or cleaning for some of DC's elderly who are threatened with eviction and homelessness. One of the Seabury service leaders was a 4 year trans-male, which none of us would have guessed. We were actually the first service group he'd felt comfortable being open with about this – a credit to our kids and our church.

Thursday was our day to meet with Dar Al-Hijrah. Planning this event had been the most challenging for me in the 6 months prior, not because there weren't Muslim groups who appreciated the idea, but because it was summertime, their youth were scattered, and there

were numerous location/transportation challenges. But in the last few weeks things began to fall into place. Mohammed Kibriya was my principle contact as leader of Dah-Youth. Nadia Hassan, the leader of another youth leadership group and Abidah, the Adams Center youth coordinator also joined in the planning. To say it was a success is an understatement. Real friendships and commonalities were discovered on both sides of this gathering. Some of our new Muslim friends from Thursday night even surprised us by making the trip into the city the next day to be with us as Dr. Syeed's guests for the 12:30 prayer vigil in the Capitol Building.

On Friday we visited an LGBT center and heard the personal stories of a PFLAG parent of a lesbian youth, a trans-female who is a US military chaplain, a gay high school teacher, and a young gay immigrant from El Salvador. Then...just to help blow out the mental traffic jam in their heads, the youth attended a baseball game between the Washington Nationals and the SF Giants for the last evening.

By that time, I had been released from my own "30 hours of Perspective" in the DC Central Cell Block (following my arrest for playing Happy Birthday without permission on the White House piano). I later learned the action was treated so seriously (overnight in jail) because the piano was next to the staircase leading to the family residence. I regret the stress it caused for our chaperones, the kids, their parents, and the church – and appreciate the support I have received despite my impulse and poor judgment.

I joined the kids Friday night after the game, and was overwhelmed by their reports of new friendships with Muslim youth and their experience at the LGBT center. This was a Perspective trip – more about working our brains than our muscles. Conversations and personal interactions with real people have a way of staying with us, where a lecture, statistic, or news-story might not. The discussions we had, the viewpoints we heard, the face-to-face memories are stored now within us, *because they are lived experiences*, and as such, cannot help but affect our perspective. We live in a multi dimensional world, and we are better people when we recognize that our perspective is not 'right.' It is just 'ours.'

Rebecca