

D.C. Youth Immerse Themselves in Haitian Life

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Neither Javien Davison nor Kierra Adkins has ever traveled overseas before but that all changes when they fly out of Washington, D.C. headed to Haiti.

The pair and 13 of their companions comprise a group of D.C. youngsters who will be in Jacmel near Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince for two weeks as part of the Washington Program for Global Kids. They left the District on July 30 and are set to return August 11.

"It's my first time abroad and I'm excited, scared and nervous. I want to take in the whole culture," said Kierra, a 17-year-old junior at Bell Multicultural High School in Northwest. "I want to be a journalist and I think this will help me in that career."

Kierra, a Southeast resident who was introduced to the program by her teacher Elizabeth Hill, said she is interested in youth education, and while in the Caribbean, hopes to learn about how much access people have to jobs and to learn to what extent that access is gender-based.

Eddie Mandhry, director of the D.C. program for the past two years, said the students – who will be traveling under the banner of the Global Gateways Program – will work with 15 Haitian counterparts on a film project with the Cine Institute.

"They will collaborate to create a film from the Haitian perspective of life after the earthquake, poverty, employment, reconstruction, health care, sanitation and other issues that are so important to people," he said. "The video will be used to inform and educate."

While there, they will also be immersed in Haiti's rich and vibrant culture and political history, and learn about different dimensions of the Haitian economy.

The program offers young people the opportunity to examine global issues and create change through peer education, social action, digital media, and service projects.

The Haiti trip is the culmination of the Global Gateways Summer Institute, a six-week program in which 25 District students spent four weeks at Howard University's Bunche International Affairs Center, exploring international and domestic policy issues. Students visited the U.S. State Department, the World Bank, and KPMG, where they learned about forensic auditing. And they toured other companies and agencies linked to issues they discussed in classes.



*Fifteen students from the District will travel to Haiti for two weeks as part of the Washington Program for Global Kids. While there, they will work with 15 Haitian students on a film project with the Cine Institute.
Courtesy Photo*

This part of the institute, Mandhry said, is designed to introduce them to a range of international careers and options.

"We're exposing them to role models in places of power and the private sector," said Mandhry, 36. The key part is making sure that they're prepared about what they're going to encounter and make them aware of what they'll see."

Global Gateways was launched in the summer of 2011 through a partnership between Global Kids and Kimberly McClure, a Foreign Service Officer with the U.S. Department of State.

In 1791, Haiti became the world's first black republic and the first independent nation in the Western Hemisphere after it won independence in 1804 in a revolt of enslaved Africans against Emperor Napoleon, France and other European powers.

The country, one of the poorest in the region, suffered a devastating earthquake on January 12, 2010. More than 300,000 died, more than half a million people were left homeless and about 75 percent of Port-au-Prince was leveled. Estimates of the total cost of the devastation runs between \$8 billion and \$10 billion and about 635,000 men, women and children still live in tent cities as the national government under President Michel Martelly struggles to restore a semblance of normalcy more than two years after the natural disaster.

Mandhry said the program here is an off-shoot of one founded in New York City 21 years ago.

"We take underserved kids from D.C. and New York City and work with them during the school year in after-school projects and interactive activities around human rights, social justice, environmental issues and child labor. We introduce them to the world, getting them to understand their place in the world and how the U.S. operates. They're inherently curious about the world anyway."

Mandhry said it's no accident that the program is based in two of the nation's most vibrant cities, one of which serves as the seat of the national government and the crossroads of international affairs, and the other which rivals the District with the United Nations, lobbying groups and a range of international organizations headquartered in New York City.

"Students don't necessarily have the exposure. We're getting them to understand their place in the world. They're really excited. This is the first experience for many of them and we're walking them through the process of [getting] passports and visas."

Javien, 18, an incoming freshman at George Mason University, said he is attracted to human rights issues particularly as it pertains to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer communities around the world. Another area of interest is women's policy issues, he said.

"It's my first time traveling overseas and I'm ready," said the Northeast resident, who recently graduated from the Columbia Heights Education Center. "I was hoping to go abroad to get experience and a better understanding of Haiti's culture, language and day-to-day-living. I'll be stepping into a whole new environment and culture. I hope to get a better understanding of the world."

Javien, who has a declared major of global affairs and a minor in conflict analysis and resolution, said he looks forward to being taught about Haitian values and is eager to see how people live their daily lives.

Mandhry knows that his charges will connect the dots.

"I'm really motivated by seeing young people generate insights they didn't have before, such as the relationship between the mineral coltan and their cell phones and computers, and chocolates and child labor in the Ivory Coast," said Mandhry, who has worked with the program for 10 years. "Seeing them make these connections and the role they can play in advocating for change is the most enjoyable part of the job."