

Hilltop Montessori Middle School students step into other people's shoes

LAURA WILSON - SPECIAL TO THE REFORMER

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By Laura Wilson, Special to the Reformer

BRATTLEBORO — Seventh and eighth grade students from the Hilltop Montessori Middle School are learning about the civil rights movement and studying such individuals as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and George Wallace as well as topics on slavery, Native Americans, women's rights, suffrage, immigration, segregation and the Chinese Immigration Act, among others.

Paul Dedell is the program director of the middle school as well as the humanities teacher. The students have been working on a variety of civil rights projects all year long. According to Dedell, the projects assist in "deepening their understanding of the civil rights movement."

Thirteen-year-old Tula Campman shared thoughts about her learning experience thus far on the topic of civil rights. "Especially with our new President, I think it is really important to understand what is going on outside our little world. Stepping out of that and looking at a whole different culture."

"Yeah," said Lucy Parks, also 13. "All year we have been learning what our American history of the South was in connection to the rest of our country. As kids growing up in Vermont, we aren't very exposed to diversity."

Leila Young, 14, said "What I want to take away from this is being aware of our history and being aware of what is happening now."

Classwork can foster a better understanding of the topic to a degree; however, it can also be somewhat limiting. What happens when you take the students out of the classroom and to the location where the civil rights movement began? You have a week-long experiential program to the black belt of Alabama that Dedell calls the "Alabama Odyssey."

The hope is that the students will "come back differently than how they started," said Dedell.

The "Alabama Odyssey" program has been available to Montessori middle school students every other year since 2002. This year 25 students will travel to Alabama with Dedell and three other staff members - Finn Campman, Nora Gordon and Becky Eisenhandler - the week of March 29 through April 5.

The group will travel to a variety of historic sites throughout Alabama. They will visit the location of the Bloody Sunday protest that took place on March 7, 1965, starting in Selma and arriving in Montgomery where they will cross over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In Montgomery they will visit the Southern Poverty Law Center, which is a legal center for civil rights that "combats hate, intolerance and discrimination through education and litigation." They will also visit the Equal Justice Initiative, a legal organization that "confronts racial injustice, advocates for equality and creates hope for marginalized communities."

"This program allows students to connect with individuals such as artists, poets, teachers and civil rights activists in a meaningful way," said Dedell. "You can still feel the lingering effects of the legacy of slavery. The trip is life changing. Students become connected to others that are less fortunate than they are. The people they interact with open their hearts to them, bring them

together, and allow them in. The students recognize how fortunate they are. Selma is not an easy place to be, however, people are always trying to make it better. A lot of kids will use this experience on their college resumes."

"We have been and are continuing to look a lot at our realm of privilege," said Magda Sharff, 13. "Becoming aware of our privilege and what it means and trying to see what it is like for people without those same privileges. We live in a community that is very white. It is easier to understand what others are going through when you step into other people's shoes."

Over the years, Dedell has made connections with several civil rights activists who make themselves available to meet with the group. This year students will have the opportunity to visit with author, poet, historian and teacher of Black History, LaQuita Middleton-Holmes, in Birmingham.

They will also meet Joe Minter, a self taught artist who lives in a small house surrounded by an African American cemetery that he describes as living with his ancestors. His yard is full of found objects that he has created into art. Minter sends student groups home with his artwork that they proudly display on the Montessori school grounds.

Students will spend time with Charlie Luca, another self-taught artist who creates sculptures and lives in Selma. The city has been hit by economic hardship with many boarded up buildings. This year students may participate in a project painting murals on some of these buildings with Luca.

During the week, the group will travel to Gee's Bend, a town known as the quilt capital of the United States, where many of the residents share the last name Pettway and are relatives of slaves from the Pettway Plantation. While in Gee's Bend they will visit Ye Shall Know the Truth Baptist Church and its members. A group from the church came to the Montessori school in October 2015 and performed a theater production.

Part of their year-long studies includes choosing a contemporary individual or a person from the past who was significant to the civil rights movement and creating a charcoal portrait and writing a research project about that individual. The students also develop a speech that is written in the spirit of that person. Once in Alabama, the students will present their speeches to fellow classmates. Occasionally, students have the honor of presenting to the actual person in whose honor they wrote the speech.

In a previous year, student John Eric Brodhurst chose civil rights activist and U.S. Rep. John Lewis for his research project. Lewis was available to meet with the group and Brodhurst gave his speech in front of the Congressman and his staff. What was supposed to be a 10-minute meeting with Lewis turned into an hour-long Q&A session. Dedell described the experience as, "moving and memorable."

Student Henry Thurber will be presenting a speech in the spirit of Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a civil rights activist in Birmingham who fought segregation and other types of racism. Prior to his passing, students were fortunate to present their speech to the Reverend directly.

This year the students and their civil rights studies will be part of a documentary that is being put together by Christopher Irion, a photographer, filmmaker and social artist. Originally from Putney, Irion lived in San Francisco for 30 years enjoying a career in the visual arts before returning to Putney. He will be traveling to Alabama with the group and has been with the students since the beginning of the school year for five or six hours a week. During this time he is earning their trust by making them feel comfortable in front of a camera and with him.

Several students are showing an interest in filmmaking and assist in setting up microphones during the filming. The scope of the documentary is unknown at this time.

Irion considers this a collaborative process and he appreciates seeing how the students are becoming critical thinkers, watching them expand their horizons and grasp onto the idea that the world is much bigger than them. He says he is less interested in what is happening and prefers the process of how students are digesting the information they are learning and turning it into creative work.

Throughout the year Irion and the students are working on mini film projects. A recent project they worked on was about the Women's March. Six female students each went to various locations of the Women's March the weekend of Jan. 21 including Washington DC, Brattleboro and Montpelier. The students filmed scenes from the marches, interviewed protestors and recorded their recollections and reactions to the experience.

Traveling by plane to Alabama for a week is expensive so part of the responsibilities of students is that they have to raise \$10,000, which is approximately 50 percent of the funds needed to travel. The students learn how to create and run businesses.

Last year, Mason Foard, 14, was one of the accountants. "I took care of the bank account. Other students get to do it too. There is a lot of trust here to handle thousands of dollars of money."

Lean Sutton-Smith, 13, said, "What I am looking forward to is that not only are we learning about the civil rights movement in our classroom but we are going to where it actually happened, where it began. We have been learning responsibility, raising money for the trip; it's our responsibility to gain something from this experience. By raising our own money, the trip is more valuable. We have to work hard for it."

All students are involved in some capacity of their businesses. Two or three may have the idea but everyone plays a role. Some of the ways students have raised money include selling bagels from Bruegger's Bagels, selling soup at the Putney Harvest Festival, where they raised \$2,000, selling pastries and coffee to parents, making and selling Adirondack chairs and offering a Kid's Night Out program once a month."

The students made it very clear that although there are certain individuals organizing different businesses, they all contribute on some level and it is a team effort to run the businesses.

When asked to share thoughts about the overall experience of the "Alabama Odyssey," Mason Foard said, "I think this experience has and will broaden my view of our country and the world."

Lucy Flynn, 13, said "A big part of our studies is learning what it means to be black, and what it means to be white in our society today, and learning to understand and move forward with the knowledge of our privilege as white citizens in America. What happened in the civil rights movement, take what we learned and put it into our lives today and how it effects how we move forward."

Tula stated that students are encouraged to "voice our opinion, we are responsible for what we are getting out of the program."

"Yeah, it's self motivated learning," added Mason.

Upon their return to the classroom the students will create a performance piece they will collectively write that will include songs, music, film, acting and poetry.

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