

The Long Drive From Harlem

By: Eric Hoover

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Washington — Last weekend, 15 young men came here to walk the bright green lawns, to sit in the plush lecture-hall chairs, and to peek inside the academic buildings made of gray stone, red brick, and green glass. They came to ask questions and take notes. They came to imagine themselves living on campuses far from home.

In some ways, these teenagers were like most prospective college applicants.



Curious, hopeful, and apprehensive. Yet these students have challenges that many others do not. They are members of the Rites of Passage program, run by Brotherhood-Sister Sol, a Harlem-based nonprofit group that offers resources and support to black and Latino youths. With the help of mentors over a four- to six-year period, the program's

participants learn leadership skills, perform community service, and prepare to become successful adults.

The program emphasizes college preparation, which includes occasional trips to out-of-town campuses. "We try to get them to think beyond their block," says DaMond Taylor, who helps coordinate the group's after-school programs.

Last Thursday morning, Mr. Taylor and two of his colleagues left Harlem with the 15 students, all sophomores or juniors. Most come from low-income families; few have parents who attended college. Riding in two vans, they drove straight to American University, in a quiet, leafy corner of Washington. There, the students filled out worksheets, describing the university's size and diversity, and listing the grade-point average they would likely need to attend. A sheet for each campus they visited would later go into their personal binders, which includes descriptions of life goals.

Anthony Keller liked American just fine, but he was more impressed with Georgetown University, which he and his fellow students visited the following day. Mr. Keller, a sophomore, surveyed the narrow streets and the stately row houses that surround Georgetown's campus. "When you're making money," he thought to himself, "this is the kind of neighborhood you're gonna live in."

Mr. Keller dreams of playing professional baseball, but just in case the future does not find him in centerfield, he would like to get a bachelor's degree and a couple of master's degrees. Perhaps one in accounting and another in engineering.

Recently, Mr. Keller says, something changed inside of him. He used to blow off homework assignments and miss classes, but this year he started sitting down to write his essays instead of fooling around outside. He stopped hanging around with friends who didn't care about school. His grade-point average has inched up, but it's not as high as he would like. "My biggest challenge is keeping the grades I say I want to get," he says.

On Friday, the students also visited Howard University, where a dean gave them an impromptu pep talk. He described how he had overcome hardships, encouraging them to pursue a college degree. The dean asked them to guess how much he had made during his career. Two hundred thousand dollars, one student said. Three hundred thousand said another. When they learned that it was close \$1.5-million, they gasped. Some cheered.

While in D.C., the students saw things many of them had never seen. The Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. The cherry blossoms along the Tidal Basin. After dinner one night, they saw people dancing on a corner, and some of the young men started dancing, too.

On Saturday morning, the students visited George Washington University, where they ate sausage-and-egg sandwiches in a spotless food court. They got a personal tour from Elizabeth Acevedo, a senior at George Washington and an alumna of Brotherhood-Sister Sol. At first, Ms. Acevedo said, she hadn't wanted to attend George Washington. For one thing, she didn't see many people who looked like her.

Over time, however, Ms. Acevedo came to feel at home. She created her own major. She made friends. "Your educational experience is what you make of it," she told the students.

The young men had many questions for her. "Do you raise your hand in college?" asked one. Another wanted to know if students were allowed to answer their cellphones in class. Could they chew gum in class? Eat lunch in class? Wear hats in class?

Ms. Acevedo told them that in college students must get to know their professors. She advised them against skipping too many classes. "Especially as students of color," she said, "you will be noticed when you're not here."

The Rites of Passage program emphasizes respect for women, and Mr. Taylor often talks to the young men about how to speak to members of the opposite sex. Students overheard using the word "bitch" must drop and do push-ups. On Saturday afternoon, Ms. Acevedo gathered the students around her and recited a poem she had written about misogyny. "My name is not 'Ho...'" it began. She told the students: "This ain't the hood no more. There are no gangstas here."

Nearby, rows of daffodils stood up straight. A fountain caught the sun. All around were students touring the campuses with their mothers and fathers, clutching tell-tale maps and scanning the scenery. A few turned to stare at the students from Harlem as they passed.

Alberto Alcantara, a sophomore, was struck by the tranquillity of each of the four campuses he visited. He lives in Washington Heights, where he has heard a stray comment start an argument, and where he has walked neighborhoods segregated by race. "On college campuses, there's no chaos," he says. "People get along."

Mr. Alcantara wants a drum set, but his apartment is not big enough. Still, he thinks he would like to study music, as well as computer programming. He has always taken school seriously, he says, but sometimes struggles with distractions. If someone makes a joke in class, he's bound to laugh out loud and get in trouble. Sometimes, things happen—his mother gets sick, for instance—and he loses focus. "It gets inside my head," he says, "and I'm not able to think straight."

Mr. Alcantara has pulled away from friends who don't like school, as well as those with a nose for trouble. A questionnaire in his backpack says: "In two years or less, you will be in college. What are the major changes you need to make now to prepare for college life?"

"Laziness," Mr. Alcantara says. Some days, he gets home from school and sleeps or turns on his Play Station 3. If he puts off studying, he knows, he will have to stay up until 2 a.m. the night before tests, which will then tire him out the next day. He wants to stop falling asleep in class.

That afternoon, the students boarded their vans for the long drive home. On the way out of town, they stopped for ice cream and visited the Iwo Jima Memorial. As the vans sailed up I-95, some students shut their eyes for a while.

But before long, the music came on, and students started talking about everything they had just seen. One told Mr. Taylor that he had loved Georgetown, but that he knew he didn't have the grades to get in. Mr. Taylor told him that now he had something to shoot for, a goal that would help him get into other colleges. Encouraged, the young man agreed.

As the students listened to songs by Lil Wayne, Lady Gaga, and the Fugees, they discussed what they liked about each college—its size, its offerings, and its feel. That night they rolled back into New York with the speakers roaring, but nobody wanted to turn the volume down.