

## Seventh Grade Service Trip to Washington, DC - October 2006

Our trip began Sunday morning, October 15. It seems like a world away already. The Amtrak train was an hour late. The station manager knows when there is a Tandem trip because he receives twenty or more phone calls to the station about the arrival time. The group had the entire last car to itself on the ride northward. David reminded many parents to watch their children's faces as the massive locomotive arrives at the terminal. The combination is fear and awe. Kathy Erskine arrived with a tiny care package of cookies and snacks with each traveler's name and the history of that name.

There were tears on both sides of the train windows. For many families, this was the first trip "alone" for the seventh grader. Fears abounded about the hostel, the big city, the homeless, the night, escalators, elevators, and other fears, too numerous to mention.

Being on a train with its comfortable seats, freedom of movement, snack bar and sights of moving countryside at sunrise is like no other travel experience.

It's a scary beginning to have to haul so much personal gear off the train, up and down escalators, into Metro trains, and to the church. The group arrives at Trinity Lutheran during the Sunday morning worship. So we enter and exit quickly, store gear in a locked room, take our lunches, and walk a few blocks to Ford's theater. Since no National Park Service rangers are in sight, Tom Spivey gives the students and a number of other visitors an informed, comprehensive, historically accurate description of the night of Lincoln's assassination. A visit to the house across the street where Lincoln died followed.

This first walk was the beginning of literally miles of walking that Sunday. From Ford's Theater, the group walked to their 2:30 appointment at the Washington Monument, where the claustrophobic and the acrophobic were forced to ride 500 feet into the air to the top of the monument. Fifteen minutes and several panic attacks later, the group descended and proceeded to the World War II memorial where Tom Spivey encouraged the students to act respectfully in a memorial honoring such an event.

Paola Christy, P.E. teacher extraordinaire, and lover of art, as her Italian heritage would expect, hurried to visitor centers to search for information about artists, sculptors and architects. She helped the group discover the meaning of the art of the monuments.

A walk on the mall along Constitution Gardens led us to the Lincoln Memorial. At the memorial, the group was joined by Maggie and Saskia, who had a soccer game and didn't ride the train with the rest of the class. Stories of "I have a dream..." and *fasces* were told. The trek continued inadvertently to the Korean War Memorial, as the group headed for the FDR Memorial. After a walk along the tidal basin and under the Japanese cherry blossom trees, one of the highlights of the seventh grade trip happens. While students and parents sit on marble benches and on the green grass, Tom Spivey tells the story of "one of the three greatest presidents, Franklin Roosevelt." This monument so graphically and interactively tells the story of FDR's four terms in stone, water, and bronze. The depression, World War II, bread lines, fireside chats, the CCC camps, Eleanor Roosevelt and the United Nations melded with Tom and David's stories, leaving a lasting impression.

"When are we getting back to the church? Do we still have farther to walk? Can we take the Metro? I'm hungry." David had the honor of taking Tom Spivey to the Jefferson Memorial for the first time on last year's seventh grade trip. So that monument, too, has become part of the Sunday tour. Another mile or two back to Judiciary Square, Fourth and E Streets, Northwest.

It's time for a dinner of penne pasta and salad. The groups then meet Felix Unogwa and his intern Holly of Washington Quaker Work Camps. The organization is located in William Penn House, a Quaker presence on Capitol Hill, and is a function of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. Felix is a Nigerian-Swedish-American. He describes Monday's work project sites and introduces us to Larry, a homeless man who has become a friend to many classes at Tandem. Larry has appeared in a film on homelessness created by two eighth grade students, Quinn Saunders and Brandan Zweig. Larry describes his life on the street and how he got there. He then speaks in deep and profound words about the concepts of giving, receiving, gratefulness, and simplicity. The other side of the coin, too, is told: depression, drug abuse, and the difficulty of life on the street.

Snacks and bedtime follow. Falling asleep is easy for some, more difficult for others. But all eventually do fall asleep.

Morning saw a breakfast of David's pancakes, cereal, and hot chocolate. Students made a lunch and headed off to their work projects. Half of them went to the Community for Creative Non-Violence, a 1,200 bed homeless shelter almost

within sight of the nation's capitol. The group was assigned to the kitchen where "massive" amounts of food were prepared. James Burton, the director of volunteers, explained that the students were angels, and so too were the clients. It was demanding work that our students do once a year, and Mr. Burton does every day.

The other half of the class went to a Women's Shelter where the retired parishioners of Blessed Sacrament church in Bethesda were preparing a brunch for 500 to 600 mostly homeless people. Students served, chopped, poured, wiped, mopped, worked in a cooler and freezer, socialized, and left quite tired. One of the ladies from Blessed Sacrament humorously remembered a Tandem Quaker visit from last year. Before serving, the staff joined in a little prayer. She asked the Tandem student to lead the prayer that day. The student was silent. She learned something about Tandem and about Quaker worship that day, and she is still smiling about it. Students at both sites were complimented for their hard work, serious dedication to the work, and courageous spirit.

The concept of Quaker Work Camps seems to call up something from deep inside the students. They know when they are not being patronized, and when they are asked to do "real work" and fulfill "real needs," and to serve "real people." They rise to meet that need and are changed by the experience.

The afternoon left some time for educational touring. Scott Gardiner, a parent in attendance, had a college friend who is now a U.S. Representative from Allentown, Pennsylvania, Mr. Dent. After some phone calls, it was arranged that three House staffers would give Tandem's three groups a special staff tour of the Capitol building.

Mallard ducks and seagulls provided entertainment on the walk back to the church hostel.

Dinner followed. Then David led a discussion and reflection on the service experience of the day. Students heard from each other. Larry reflected from the point of view of a homeless person. Students were led to contemplate, with no clear answers, issues of race, gender, poverty, minimum wage, mental illness, and homelessness. The juxtaposition of the Capitol building and the world's largest homeless shelter almost within sight of each other was called to the group's attention. About all of these issues, students have now had some first-hand experience.

Tuesday, the final day of the adventure, began with a light rain that got heavier as the day progressed. Breakfast consisted of Egg-McHamar muffins. Students walked to the National Archives and got a first-hand look at the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. Lunch followed in the Air and Space Museum.

Lee Halstead scheduled three docents for a look at the elements of art at the Hirshhorn Museum of Modern Art. The docents were uniformly amazed at the students' interest and enthusiasm for the works of art. Lee had prepared them with some slides before they arrived. That previous knowledge created great excitement when the real images were seen. All three tour groups found themselves extended by an extra half hour because of student enthusiasm. The tour ended in the lower level where students saw a sculpture by Emily Kauffman of Charlottesville, who is the wife of John Watkins, a former drama teacher at Tandem.

The train ride home consisted primarily of small group discussions about who liked whom, and who used to like whom—a very seventh grade experience.

This is now the third year of the beginning-of-year service and community-building trips in the Tandem Middle School. They take the place of what used to be a spring D.C. trip—a time when the city was much more crowded. Each year the cooperation of staff, parents, and students increases. These service trips in fifth, seventh, and eighth grades reflect Tandem's commitment to service, to a sense of community, and to excellence in education. *Ad multos annos!*