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he lush greenery surrounding the NNonkonsuo Slave River Memorial Center in Ghana, Africa, is gone, abruptly replaced by darkness. At first the children appear to enjoy it, like that game when blindfolded kids awkwardly swing at a piñata hoping to make the candy come cascading out.

Their minds are racing. It shows on their 13- and 14-year-old faces shrouded by a frayed piece of black cloth wrapped tightly around their eyes. It doesn't take long—about 10 minutes—for reality to set in. Mommy isn't here. They're in a foreign land. And they have no clue where they're going. There are only the shoulders of the classmate in front of them to grasp onto as they navigate single-file through the rough terrain littered with rocks, twigs and dirt. Prompted by their guide, they slowly repeat the same phrase, "I am walking in the footsteps of my ancestors—I am my ancestors."

With each uncertain step, the lessons learned in Mr. Edelin's social studies class at their Atlanta middle school thousands of miles away come to life in frighteningly vivid detail. Tears stream down their faces and some tremble as somehow, miraculously, the very real terror they're experiencing allows them, for the first time, to truly connect with the experiences of their ancestors who walked this very same route hundreds of years ago. Those ancestral Africans also were completely unaware that they were heading to the Assin Manso River. But they were there to take a last bath before being locked in dungeons for months and then shipped like cargo to America to endure a life of slavery.

"I was thinking about the fact that thousands of people who lived hundreds of years ago with a face I've never seen; a name I've never heard; had their feet where mine were" recalls student Deranda Butler. "Our guide was right; I was walking in the footsteps of my ancestors."

"I learned about slavery in school, but this made me really feel it," says Butler's classmate Alexandra Celestin. "I have such respect for my ancestors, and I want to make them proud."

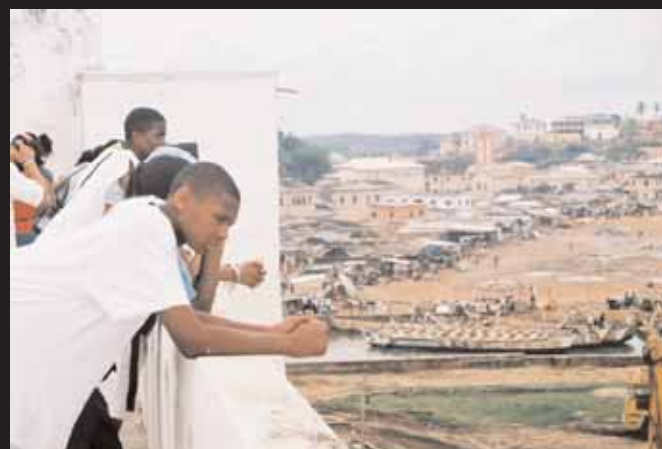
As the blindfolds are untied, the teenagers—some sporting Sean John and Baby Phat gear—in groups of two or three at a time step into the river, splashing the water with their arms and legs as their guides share the significance of this experience. Solomon Seaborn stares blankly



FROM ATLANTA TO AFRICA

AMERICAN YOUNGSTERS EMBARK ON A JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY IN GHANA

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSEPH EDELIN'S EIGHTH-GRADE CLASS AT KIPP WAYS ACADEMY





ahead, Tina Kirkland sobs uncontrollably, and Sara-maat Imhotep, Chinwe Cook and Ndeye Thioubou weep quietly as they clutch one another tightly in the rushing calf-high water.

Perhaps the experience exposes a vulnerability that allows the often-abstract concept of slavery to become real for the first time, or maybe it's just the wave of emotions that surface at the oddest times upon the realization of a dream. But emotions flow freely like the raindrops cascading from the sky on this overcast day last June.

Standing in that West African river was indeed a dream come true for this group of eighth-graders—the first to graduate from the 5-year-old KIPP WAYS Academy (an acronym for Knowledge Is Power Program West Atlanta Young Scholars), one of two metro Atlanta branches of the innovative national charter school program that has been featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

They had worked hard for this life-changing journey. Every student in their class passed all required standardized tests. Their school is the No. 1 public middle school in the city of Atlanta; it ranks 11th out of Georgia's 418 middle schools; and fourth in math scores among public schools in the state. All this from students who hail from some of the city's poorest ZIP codes, neighborhoods where crime, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse and chronic poverty overshadow academic achievement. They'd been learning about Africa since seventh grade so when their principal and teachers asked where they wanted to go for their graduation trip, these hip-hop loving, MP3 player-toting, MySpace-surfing teens gave a surprising response.

"We expected Disney World, the beach or maybe even New York," says principal David Jernigan. "But they said they wanted to go to West Africa."

The KIPP program is about dreams, helping mostly economically disadvantaged youngsters achieve the dream of attending college. So how could school leaders not at least try to make this wish—however far-fetched it may have seemed—come true?

The children solicited donations, held bake sales, and a local radio station, V-103, even held a live fund-raiser on their behalf at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. Collectively, the efforts yielded about \$40,000—only one-third of the trip's more than \$120,000 price tag. Then, in the 13th hour, came divine intervention. Atlanta City Councilman Ceasar Mitchell's contact at Delta Airlines, Scarlet Pressley-Brown, general manager of Global Diversity and Community Affairs, had come through. Delta donated all 49 of the plane tickets for the historic trip.

So just weeks after graduation and a blur of preparations, passport applications and vaccination shots, they were off to the Motherland. After two flights (the first-ever for many in this group) fear and excitement gave way to elation as they stepped off the plane, greeted by a hazy-rose-colored sky in Accra, Ghana.

By the numbers, the trip was nine days; there were 33 teenagers, 16 adult chaperones, seven tour guides and a three-member documentary film crew on a shoestring budget to capture their every move.



“I felt called to tell this story,” says filmmaker Redelia Shaw, who is still fund-raising to complete the final cut of *Journey Into Africa*, which also includes footage shot by the students. “I knew so many others could also learn about the beauty of Africa through their experience.”

Somehow these young, gifted and Black students—many of whom had never ventured out of their neighborhood—were suddenly a continent away negotiating with overzealous merchants in Kejetia Market, West Africa’s largest open-air marketplace, which is a maze of booths offering everything from fresh tomatoes to kente cloth.

On their journey, they spent time enjoying bottled Fanta and finger sandwiches with Ghana’s first lady at the president’s palatial estate; soaking in the spray of the massive Wli Waterfalls (the highest in West Africa); traversing a rope bridge dangling 100 feet above the Kakum rain forest; hiking to the peak of Amedzofe Mountain and singing Beyoncé songs together with African students at a Ghanaian primary school. Suddenly places like Cape Coast, Elmina Slave Dungeon, Kumasi, Kente Weaver’s Village, Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, W.E.B. DuBois Centre and the Volta Region were more than lecture topics.

Far away from music videos, computer chatting and the distractions of American life—aboard a chartered bus transformed into a rolling classroom filled with thought-provoking discussion, inner reflection, singing and drumming—the barrage of stereotypes and misconceptions about Africa melted away, revealing the beauty of the continent and their African heritage.

“Even though we have so much in America, the people there [in Africa] seem to have a greater sense of community,” says Sara-maat, who says she would like to move to Africa. “Even if they don’t know you, they trust you and have a sense of respect for each other.”

“So many African-Americans are ignorant about Africa because of the bad that they hear, but if they saw this place they would be proud like I am of where I come from,” adds Charles King.

Teacher Joseph Edelin says it was especially uplifting experiencing Africa through his students’ eyes.

“I’ve watched their dramatic transformation from not knowing anything about Africa except the stereotypes of people walking around half-naked with flies everywhere, to having a great sense of pride,” Edelin says. “It’s beautiful. I wish more Black kids could have this experience.”

The true impact of this spiritual journey to Africa at such a turning point in their young lives may not be apparent for many years to come. And although it’s unclear if the school can afford to send another class, one fact rings as true as the force that rose up in these very American teenagers who sobbed inconsolably inside the El Mina slave dungeon one sunny afternoon: The spirit of Africa is now forever embedded in their hearts.

“In the dungeon, they showed us ‘The Door of No Return,’ where our ancestors were forced through to the Middle Passage, never to return again,” says Indasia Johnson. “It was ‘The Door of No Return,’ but we returned stronger than ever.” □