



Alvin Benn Advertiser

Cydney Ross inspects the likeness of a civil rights activist during a visit Friday to the Selma-to-Montgomery Historic Trail interpretive center in White Hall.

Missouri teens learn lessons of unity

By Alvin Benn
abenn@gannett.com

WHITE HALL — A group of Missouri teenagers spent Friday in Alabama's Black Belt to learn more about the civil rights movement of the 1960s as well as current efforts to foster racial harmony between blacks and Jews.

The annual monthlong visit sponsored by Cultural Leadership, based in St. Louis, has helped hundreds of youngsters better understand civil rights history and get to know each other.

"I think if I came down by myself to study the movement, I would feel somewhat removed, but with a group like I'm with today, it is much more meaningful," said Ola Coker. "I'm learning a lot."

The 21 students — 9 Jews and 13 blacks — left St. Louis

on June 8 and spent time in New York, Washington and Atlanta before arriving Friday in Alabama.

By the time they return home July 4, they will have met white and black leaders in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Tennessee.

"I never had an African-American friend before," said Carly Ferdman, 16. "My school is pretty much segregated. Being with a group like this one makes what we're doing a lot more real."

During the civil rights movement, Jews played a major role in helping blacks eliminate racial barriers to public accommodations and voting. Many marched to push for changes. Two Jews — Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner — were murdered in Mississippi in 1964 for encouraging blacks to vote.

One stop during the extended trip will be in Neshoba County, Miss., where Goodman, Schwerner and black civil rights activist James Chaney were killed by racists, including law enforcement officers.

"I'm learning a lot about Jewish people and how they helped us back then," said T.J. Brooks, 17, who is black. "I didn't know they had as big an effect on what happened as they did."

Relations between Jews and blacks have deteriorated in recent years, and one reason for the annual trip into the Deep South is to demonstrate the importance of mutual respect.

During the group's visit to the Selma-to-Montgomery Historic Trail Interpretive Center in White Hall, students viewed exhibits featuring uniforms worn by Alabama State Troopers who beat marchers in Sel-

ma as well as tents depicting how sharecroppers lived after they were forced out of their homes for trying to register to vote in Lowndes County.

"We want them to see the shoulders they are standing on and we want the former civil rights workers to see the next generation of civil rights activists," said Karen Kalish, who helped organize the Cultural Leadership program.

Montgomery activist Gwen Patton talked with the students shortly after they arrived in White Hall and urged them to learn more about the civil rights movement. She told them the changes that occurred did not come "without a struggle."

Today's visit to Montgomery will include stops at the Rosa Parks Museum, Southern Poverty Law Center and Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church.