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## Opening eyes, minds

### Youths see a world beyond Baltimore

By Julie Bykowicz

Sun reporter

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New Haven, Conn.

The boys from Baltimore sprawled on leather chairs and sofas in the dark-paneled sitting room of a castle-like residential college at Yale University. It was the kind of place where scholars from earlier decades might have relaxed with cigars as they dissected the philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

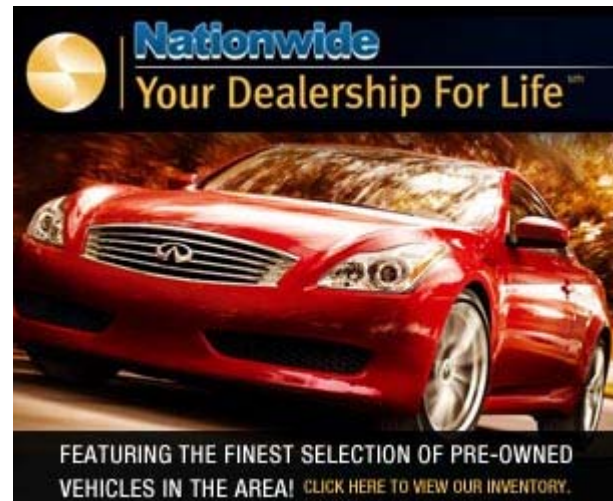
This lesson was just as heady. These 47 children and teenagers, many from tough sections of Baltimore where life can seem fleeting and hopeless, made the 270-mile journey here last weekend to learn about another kind of future.

"They say a black person is only as far as he goes," said Jovon Howard, 16. "I want to get into different surroundings."

Over the course of last weekend, Jovon would find himself on the very stage once dominated by Samuel L. Jackson and Charles S. Dutton, the Yale Repertory Theater. He'd tackle a range of activities, from touring a helicopter factory to finding out what it takes to get accepted to Yale. He'd lounge in a hotel swimming pool and ride a tour bus through New Haven's historic neighborhoods.

The trip to Connecticut was part of a program called "Mentoring Male Teens in the Hood," an effort to expose young Baltimore-area men to male role models and new experiences while helping them connect with their peers. Although it has been around for 12 years and served more than 8,000 boys, it exists solely because its organizer, Cameron Miles, is willing to beg for donations and go into his own pocket to help finance excursions.

He also seems to know all the right people. At the group's monthly meetings at Coppin State University, Miles presents a parade of important guests: Judge Robert M. Bell, chief of the Maryland Court of Appeals; television reporter Barry Simms; Baltimore State's Attorney Patricia C. Jessamy. Miles bumped into city Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III at a restaurant a few months ago and invited him to the April meeting.



"Frankly, I was blown away," Bealefeld said, "not just by his commitment, but by the manner in which he engaged the young men and by the substance of his message."

#### **From all over**

The boys, ages 7 to 17, are from across Baltimore. A few come from nearby counties. Some are referred by juvenile judges or police officers. A half-dozen live in residential foster care. Most come to the program through word of mouth. Risa Gill, a single parent of an 11-year-old boy, heard Miles on the radio and then saw him speak at Morgan State University. "I wanted my son to be around male mentors," she said.

Jovon and his brother Jordan, 14, who live in Murphy Homes, joined about two years ago, at their father's request; he died in September.

The Howard brothers were among the most energetic last Friday morning, as the boys waited for their bus to pull into Coppin's parking lot. They stood in the hot summer sun amid their backpacks and gym bags, cracking jokes as Kip Hall, one of the mentors, asked whether they'd remembered to bring the important stuff: deodorant, toothpaste, a toothbrush.

And, added mentor Dan Dorazio, "a good attitude."

The six adults on the trip warned the boys that they'd deploy push-ups to keep them in line.

A few minutes before the bus arrived, Lt. Col. Rick Hite, commander of the Baltimore Police Department's youth services division, stopped by for a pep talk.

"Boys, you've got to come back and represent," Hite said.

"Don't take this for granted. A lot of people never leave the east side or the west side. A lot of people never know what it feels like to sleep on clean, good linens in a hotel."

#### **In Connecticut**

They arrived at the Courtyard Marriott in Shelton, Conn., Friday evening and scarfed down foot-long Subway sandwiches.

They changed into their swim trunks and headed to the indoor pool - the highlight of overnight trips for any teen-ager.

Lights-out was to be 11 p.m., but at 1 a.m. the adults were still ordering push-ups for curfew violations.

Miles addressed the late-night ruckus over Saturday's breakfast, reminding them, "We need to be respectful of other people at all times." He led them in their group chant. "I am somebody. I am a King. I have self-worth. ... Failure is not an option."

That same phrase is printed on the back of the black T-shirts they slipped on after breakfast for the day's events.

First stop: The Sikorsky helicopter factory in nearby Stratford, a site selected by Miles after his return late last year from a 17-month Iraq deployment in the National Guard's aviation unit.

At the factory, war veterans walked them through the assembly line for the famous Blackhawk helicopter.

A guide mentioned that starting pay for workers is about \$18 to \$20 per hour.

"That's honest money," Hall reminded the youths. "That's not standing around on the street."

Afterward, they assembled in front of the building for a group photo: "Short brothers in the front, taller brothers in the back," Miles called out.

Then it was back on the bus, Yale-bound.

When they arrived on campus, the kids gathered at a stone wall along York Road that made Yale seem like a fortress. They dined in an ornate dining hall that Gill compared to a scene from Harry Potter.

The afternoon's tour guide was Gabriel Seidman, Class of 2011. As he walked through the historic campus, he told them that just about everything they like - pizza, hamburgers, Frisbee, intercollegiate sports - was invented at Yale or in New Haven. They paused at Yale's landmarks, including a statue of Nathan Hale, whom Gabriel identified as America's first spy.

The group of young African-American boys dressed in identical T-shirts drew glances from the few students on campus.

A young man asked where they were from. Then: "Have you seen The Wire?"

Jovon spoke up, "We live The Wire. We just have to step outside to see The Wire."

They walked by a young Chinese woman talking on her cell phone.

"Is she speaking another language, or is she just talking fast?" 15-year-old William Murphy asked.

Justin Harris, 15, snapped photos of the campus buildings, saying to his friends, "They're for my mother. She is always complaining, 'You never want to have a good conversation.'"

Near the end of the tour, they passed Grove Street Cemetery, home to many departed Yale luminaries, and Miles remarked that he was touched by the inscription on the gate.

Tavon Anderson, 13, read it aloud: "The dead shall be rised."

Powell's rebuke was immediate. "Boy, what grade are you in?"

Miles added, "You want to do some push-ups?"

"I mean, 'The dead shall be raised.'" Tavon corrected himself.

"It's amazing how push-ups can change the thought process," Miles observed.

Miles, 45, knows well what it's like for these boys. He was raised in West Baltimore by his mother and grandmother. At Hilton Elementary School, he was picking fights. At Catonsville High School, where he was bused from the city every day, he became a father. As a young man, he was selling drugs. He

served prison time for narcotics distribution, he says, but was pardoned by then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening.

### **Turning it around**

He changed.

He repaired his relationship with his two older children and is committed to his two young daughters.

He received a bachelor's degree in business management from Coppin and a master's in legal and ethical studies from the University of Baltimore.

He became politically active.

He started working for the Department of Social Services.

There, he says he saw "the angriest young men" walking through the hallways, cussing, fighting. He wanted to do something about it. So he picked five boys and, in the cafeteria of the social services office on Biddle Street, held the first meeting of Mentoring Male Teens in the Hood.

They meet monthly, now at Coppin, and take trips when Miles can raise the money. Two years ago, they traveled to Philadelphia.

One of those original five youths was Antoine "Woody" Diggs, whose aunt was raising him. "He was a knucklehead," Miles remembers. "He wouldn't listen to anybody. He was out of control."

Woody grew up under Miles' wing. Now a 19-year-old sophomore at Morgan, he has gone from program participant to mentor.

It is difficult to measure the success of Miles' program by numbers. With a full-time job as organizing director for the Baltimore group Advocates for Children and Youth, Miles runs the mentoring program in evenings and on weekends.

He says he barely has time to apply for grants, let alone keep tabs on his former charges.

He knows that three young men have been shot to death over the years.

One was mentor Wanda Powell's son, Darrell Smith. She has been involved with the group since her son was 16, sticking around long after he decided to stop attending. He was shot to death in April 2007 in Baltimore, at age 21, during a fight over a girl, she said.

"Too many of our young men end up in the penal system or the cemetery," Miles says frequently. And that is his motivation.

The police commissioner says that Baltimore is filled with people "we don't know about," people who are trying to make a difference in some way.

Still, Bealefeld said, Miles stands out.

"He doesn't grandstand. He just gives selfless service to the community. You can't ask people for more than that," Bealefeld said. "We throw that word 'hero' around a lot. But that man, that guy is a hero. He's

a hero of mine."

Bealefeld said he had "no qualms" about writing a personal check to Miles.

Other leaders, including Department of Juvenile Services Secretary Donald W. DeVore - a man whose policies Miles, in his day job as a youth advocate, frequently criticizes - have also written personal checks.

### **The rewards**

The trip to Connecticut cost \$18,000. The exposure the boys got to life outside Baltimore, Miles says, made it money well spent.

Each of them came away with a highlight. For some, it was the pool, the experience of being in a hotel for the first time in their lives.

Others thought that seeing the president's helicopter being serviced (from a significant distance) was the coolest.

But what Jovon, a rising junior at Frederick Douglass High School, and another budding actor, Tavon Powell, 16 and a rising senior at Baltimore Talent Development High School, might remember most was their moment on stage at the Yale Repertory Theater.

A graduate student, Kevin Allen Daniels, 24, sat down and talked with the group. He said he never imagined being an actor, fearing instead that he would end up a drug dealer in his native Dallas.

Now he studies at the place that produced stars like Angela Bassett.

Miles asked Daniels to perform for them.

Daniels took his keys and his cell phone out of his shorts pocket and slipped into Shakespeare's Iago from Othello. The kids applauded enthusiastically. Then Miles asked if Daniels would give a mini-lesson to Jovon and Tavon, the group's most serious performers.

Tavon wore a bright yellow cast from a recent car accident, but he hopped up on stage without hesitation. He stood before an audience of his peers and launched into his own spoken-word piece, a personification of poetry as a sensual woman.

Impressed with the young man's flow, Daniels clutched his heart as he paced the aisle listening to him.

Jovon - the class clown who was at times so hyper that he broke into a dance in the hotel hallway or injected himself into a game of Frisbee on Yale's quad - channeled all of that energy into a Nat Turner monologue he had memorized.

Coaching him, Daniels said, pointing to the audience, "Look at them. You are trying to start an uprising. Convince those people."

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