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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

A life-changing trip for Hub dance troupe

Talia Whyte

When Shaumba-Yandje Dibinga first started planning to bring members of her Roxbury-based youth dance organization OrigiNation to South Africa, her goal was simply to give her students the opportunity to perform in another country.

Little did she know that the 10-day trip would be a soul-searching, life-changing experience for her and her 17 young charges.

Last year Dibinga, OrigiNation's executive director, came up with the idea of bringing her students to South Africa. She contacted her brother, who lived there at the time, to help arrange the trip because she thought it would be great to expose her students to the country's rich culture and history.

"We always wanted to bring OrigiNation to Africa," she said. "I wanted to expose them to different traditions, especially the music and dances of Africa."

After setting a Nov. 22 date for the trip, the youth members raised funds through a series of bake sales and donations from community members to not only pay for the trip, but also purchase school supplies and clothing for the South African students they were visiting. In their travels last month, the dance troupe members performed for and taught dance steps to their South African counterparts in schools in Johannesburg, Pretoria and Cape Town.

OrigiNation member David Brown, 17, said it was wonderful to teach South African youth hip-hop and tap dance steps, and to learn some new steps as well.

"I learned about Zulu dances," he said. "I didn't



Members of the Roxbury-based youth dance organization OrigiNation visited the Hector Pieterse Museum in Soweto, South Africa, during a recent trip to perform in the African nation. Pieterse was among the first students killed during the 1976 student uprising in Soweto. He has become a symbol of resistance to apartheid. (Photo courtesy of OrigiNation)



Members of OrigiNation pose with the Usuthu Youth Dance Company at the State Theatre in Pretoria, South Africa. During their 10-day trip to South Africa, from Nov. 22-Dec. 3, OrigiNation's youth dancers facilitated and participated in dance workshops and learned traditional Zulu dances. (Photo courtesy of OrigiNation)

know before that hip-hop and Zulu dances were so similar.”

In addition to the performances, the trip members also learned about South Africa’s turbulent racial history. They visited historical landmarks like Nelson Mandela’s home in the black township of Soweto and the Hector Pieterse Museum, memorializing one of the first students to be killed during the 1976 student uprising against the apartheid regime in Soweto.

However, it was a visit to the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg that made trip members reevaluate how they perceive racism, both in Africa and in America.

During the visit, OrigiNation members were in the museum at the same time as a group of white teenagers from Britain. Some OrigiNation members were offended when the white teenagers made lewd, racially insensitive gestures about an exhibit of naked black men who were handcuffed by the apartheid regime’s security force.

“That was just offensive,” said trip participant Ashley Vassall, 19. “To be in the Apartheid Museum and see that kind of disrespect is totally uncalled for. I have never seen racism like that in America in my lifetime. It was certainly a learning experience.”

The experience in the Apartheid Museum led to further discussion that evening about race relations, especially the use of the n-word among African American youth.

“Being in South Africa allowed us to understand why the word shouldn’t be used,” said trip participant Shekia Scott, 18.

Dampening those tensions was the interaction with South African youth. Many of the trip members said they felt that they were being welcomed “home” by the Africans’ warm reception. It was also an opportunity for them to debunk stereotypes about Africa — many said they learned that most things related about Africa in Western media are not only wrong, but just plain ignorant and racist.

“Before we went to South Africa, people told us that lions and monkeys roam the streets and everyone there is poor and has AIDS,” said trip member Keenan Cooks, 17. “All of that is simply not true.

Now when I hear people here say things like that, I get mad.”

Since coming back from the trip on Dec. 3, Origination has already started making plans for another trip to a different country in Africa next year. In addition, trip members are raising funds to bring their South African tour guide to Boston next February for Black History Month, and send her back with more school supplies and clothing for South African youth.

The participants said they felt that the trip permanently changed their view of the world.

“It was the best experience of my life,” said trip participant Ashley Bleeker, 18. “I brought back so much to share with others and to keep for myself.”

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