

High school students head to Morocco for cultural experience

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By Alisha George Times Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, July 25, 2013 12:00 am

Tameem McClinton has done a lot of research to prepare for his trip to Morocco, but all that preparation still comes with some uncertainty.

“I have no clue what to expect,” said McClinton, a junior at Winters Mill High School. “It’s going to be cool to see how they’re different than us.”

McClinton and nine other high school students are heading to Morocco today with Higher Learning Inc., a nonprofit that provides active educational programming for youth, ages 11 to 17, in the Maryland area.

The students and two chaperones will be in Morocco from today through August 2. The group will hold debriefing sessions August 5 and 6, which will give them the opportunity to discuss their experience.

Students in high school who are selected to go on the trip abroad must have participated in Higher Learning Inc. programs before or have been involved with a partner organization. They are also selected based on their behavior and responsibility.

For two six-hour sessions this week, students prepared for the trip by meeting at East Middle School. Roxanna Harlow, founder and executive director at Higher Learning Inc., said she doesn’t believe students should be clueless about where they are traveling.

Mohamed Esa, chair of the Department of Foreign Languages at McDaniel College, visited the students Tuesday as they prepared for the trip.

Esa talked about Ramadan, a time of fasting for Muslims all over the world, and showed them a prayer rug and a Quran. He also talked about the culture of Morocco so the students would be prepared to visit the country.

“Muslims have to pray in Arabic,” he said.

During the pre-trip sessions, students also each created a presentation about one topic related to Morocco, including the political history, cultural norms, Islam and Ramadan, and then presented those topics to one another. They also discussed the basics of the trip and did team building exercises.

While on the trip, students will receive language lessons, meet with organizations making changes in Morocco, take cooking lessons and complete a service project. They will stay with host families and experience the country’s culture by visiting the marketplaces.

The students should learn not to be afraid of people’s differences, but instead to be excited about them. Harlow said there are similarities and differences among all cultures.

The trip is free to students and paid for by Higher Learning Inc. through grant money and individual donations, Harlow said.

“It’s important to be able to see what’s going on in the world,” she said. “This is a global economy and we are more and more connected to each other.”

The students will be visiting Morocco during Ramadan, which will add to the cultural experience, Harlow said.

Harlow said this is the third year she has taken a group of 10 students to a foreign country over the summer. The other trips have been to Mexico and Nicaragua, so Harlow thought it was a good time for a change.

The trips abroad focus on social justice issues. The students see what people, especially other young people, are doing in their countries to address inequality and social problems.

“The other purpose is to simply learn about and experience new places and cultures,” she said.

McClinton said the other trips abroad weren’t what he expected. He enjoyed learning about how the people in Mexico and Nicaragua don’t have much money, but they have pride, are generous and family means a lot to them.

“They’re so ready to share even though they don’t have a lot,” he said.

Mischka Johnson, a junior at Westminster High School, said the other trips abroad have made her feel fortunate for all she has and have opened her eyes to poverty in her community.

She enjoyed learning about cultural norms in Morocco before going on the trip.

“I think it’s important that we know how their culture works so we don’t offend them,” she said.

Johnson has learned a lot about Ramadan and how it is a time for Muslims to meditate on themselves and God and to become more spiritual.

“I think some of us will try to observe it at least some of the time while we’re there,” she said.

Harlow hopes this inspires the students to take action in their own communities and to see how what people do in other countries relates to what can be done in the United States.

“People are always working to better where they are,” she said.

The purpose of the trip is to educate the students and give them a new experience, Harlow said.

“The students are very excited,” she said. “If the first two trips are any indication, it’s a very valuable experience.”

Kevin Kwaku-Mensah, a sophomore at Westminster High School, said he has been mentally preparing for the trip. He enjoyed learning about Morocco’s government, which is a constitutional monarchy.

He is ready to embark on the new and different experience.

“I don’t know what to expect, but it’s going to be fun, that’s for sure,” he said.