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Diversity project unites Burke, Wando students

BY DIETTE COURRÉGÉ
dcourrege@postandcourier.com
Thursday, March 8, 2012

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Organizers had planned ice- breakers for students from Burke and Wando high schools taking a diversity-oriented field trip together, but they didn't need them.



Photo by Brad Nettles

Students from Burke and Wando high schools came together Wednesday among the trees that form the "Bone Yard" on the beach at Bull Island. The students were taking part in a diversity project that brings together students from different backgrounds.

Video

Diversity Project



Students from Burke and Wando High School's spent a day on Bull Island as they participate in the first diversity project that brings students from a majority white high school and black high school together.

Less than an hour after introductions, teenagers from the high-poverty school downtown and the high-achieving school in Mount Pleasant were acting like BFFs, belting out the lyrics to popular songs, talking about prom and cutting up.

It was the kind of day that exceeded expectations all around.

"I was just happy about getting out of school for the day ... but that changed," said January Little, a gregarious sophomore at Burke High who lightened the group's mood all day. "I got to meet awesome people and see a beautiful island."

Fifteen students from each school spent Wednesday on Bull's Island, an undeveloped barrier island in the Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge.

The outing was a project developed by eight members of the Lowcountry South Carolina Diversity Leaders Initiative class, a project of the Richard W. Riley Institute at Furman University.

"If they understand that biodiversity creates healthy communities, and cultural diversity creates healthy communities -- if they get that, we'd be thrilled," said Deb Campeau, a health-care executive and member of the project team.

Campeau's group wanted to raise students' understanding of diversity, but do it in a natural way. They invited students from two schools -- Wando High, which is predominantly white and more affluent, and Burke High, which is predominantly black and low-income -- and asked them to choose a buddy from the other school.

They didn't force discussions, so students learned about one another by impromptu conversations,

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Photo by Brad Nettles

Chris Crolley with Coastal Expeditions explains the ecological environment of the marsh and water that surround Bull Island to students from Burke and Wando high schools as they ride a boat to the island Wednesday.

such as when Little told his buddy, Wando junior Mikayla Knizevski, over their Chick-fil-A breakfast that he used to work at the restaurant. That led to more talk about jobs.

"I think you have to come into it with an open mind," Knizevski said.

Their education on the island itself was more structured. A naturalist gave students a tour, explaining its history, ecosystems and the ramifications of the changing climate. They saw the result of erosion on "boneyard beach," and students used the scenic backdrop of downed and weathered trees to pose for pictures with their new friends.

They ate lunch on picnic tables, and Little toasted the group and the experience. Their "formal" instruction wrapped up after a sweetgrass basket maker talked about her craft and the Gullah heritage.

Brian Wells, an engineer and member of the project team, said they likely will approach Charleston County school leaders about making the trip an annual event in the spring and fall.

It would require some funding -- Piggly Wiggly donated the lunches and the Post and Courier Foundation covered the \$1,000 cost for the ferry -- but it would be worth it, he said.

Students agreed. They swapped phone numbers and Facebook profile information, and promised to keep in touch.

"We all had the same things in common," said Dezmon Venning, a senior at Wando. "We go through the same things in school, and we like the same music. We aren't that different after all."

Rae-Nessha White, a junior at Burke, felt nervous about the trip, but said the day never felt awkward. Everyone enjoyed themselves and made new connections, and it's not often they have the chance to do that with students from another school, she said.

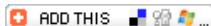
"Sometimes you go on field trips and you just don't pay attention, but this field trip, it made you pay attention," said White as she walked back to the ferry. "You learned, whether you wanted to or not."

Four girls walked in front of White. They held hands.

Reach **Diette Courrégé** at 937-5546.

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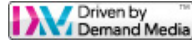
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