

TEENS OFF TO INDIA FOR LIFE LESSONS

THREE CITY STUDENTS TO HELP BUILD SCHOOL AS PART OF VOLUNTEER PROGRAM

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A summer journey to India for three girls from an inner-city Baltimore school began simply, in an after-school club that devoted itself to helping other people.

The club at Baltimore Talent Development High School raised money to buy mittens for preschoolers in a nearby Head Start program. Christin Morris, Indigo McMillian and **LaKeisha Johnson** liked the surprised expression on the children's faces when they opened up the gift bags at Christmas. "I like helping people. It feels good to give back," said Christin, 15.

From there they moved on to corresponding with students in Kenya by creating a scrapbook of their lives illustrated by photographs. The students described the drug problem in their community and the typical life of a high school student: working hard at school and at fast-food restaurants in the afternoon. Their Kenyan pen pals said their after-school jobs were herding sheep and cows. They were dropping out and getting married by the time they were 15, an idea that was shocking to the city students.

The exchange led to a desire by members of the school club, called Youth4Change, to raise money to build an irrigation system for a village in Africa.

Today, three of the members of the club will take the next step when they board a plane to India that will take them on a three-week international volunteer program. **The girls, who have never been on a plane or out of the country before, will learn about the culture of India, help build a school in a rural town there and teach games to children.**

Their high school history teacher, Cheree Davis, started them on the road when she formed the after-school club through an Oprah Winfrey organization called O Ambassadors. The world history teacher said she has always believed that students should volunteer their time in some way.

Once the club was going well last school year, she said, the members were offered the opportunity to apply to go on a trip to another country. The three friends, who will all begin their junior year this fall, said they spent hours filling out the application and writing an essay about why they wanted to go to India and what they believed they could get out of it. The deadline came as they studied for midterms and the High School Assessments. LaKeisha's computer at home crashed, and she stayed up all night completing the information. "It was overwhelming," Indigo said.

Once the three were accepted, they really had to get to work, Davis said. **O Ambassadors provided scholarships, but the students still had to raise thousands of dollars for their trip.**

They did everything they could think of to promote the cause. Their principal agreed to dress up as a woman if the student body raised \$3,000. (They didn't quite make the challenge.) Another teacher sponsored Cookie Friday, when she would sell home-baked cookies to students. Davis said she also received a \$4,000 donation from the Vanguard Justice Society, a nonprofit group of local African-American law enforcement officers.

In the end, the school was able to raise more than \$6,000, Davis said.

"It has taken a long time and a lot of patience," Indigo said.

The girls said they hope to gain leadership skills in India that they will use next year to persuade other students to become more involved in service projects. "I think this will be a huge impact [on me]," LaKeisha said. She said she wants students in her school to explore the world at least through her India experiences and to understand "there is more to life than West Baltimore."

Christin's mother said she wanted her daughter to travel abroad and had been looking at a summer program for a year from now. "I think it will teach the kids how lucky and blessed they are to be living in the United States," said Gwendyln Morris.

The one person who won't be going with them is the teacher who has seen them through the process. She has helped them get visas, shop for items for the trip and raise money.

"I always wanted to be a teacher. I never imagined giving the students these kind of opportunities. I feel like I have hit the educational jackpot," Davis said.