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Preston Love Jr.

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Black Votes Matter
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Black Lives, Black Poverty and Black Votes Matter

Black Votes Matter Plans Civil Right Tour Planned for or Teens



Maurice Jones has the résumé to prove how an Omaha Public Schools-sponsored trip to Selma for the 50th anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” changed his life. Next summer, 40 more teens will get the same chance.

After returning to Omaha from the 2015 trip, the then-17-year-old Jones got involved in Black Votes Matter and the Nebraska Democratic Party, becoming the elected vice chair for the party’s Black Caucus. He ran an ultimately unsuccessful campaign last year for a seat on Omaha’s City Council, and is now looking forward to starting college next fall with a triple major in history, public policy and political science. Experiencing Selma turned his textbook knowledge of civil rights into a personal call to action, Jones said.

“It’s been something I can’t get out of my head,” he said. “Now I know I have a voice, and I need to stand up and advocate, and never settle for complacency.”

Preston Love, the founder and director of Black Votes Matter and an adjunct professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, hopes to spur the same epiphany in 40 other high schoolers from north Omaha with a trip to more than 15 Southern civil rights venues, including the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and the

16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, where a bombing killed four young girls in 1963.

The tour is planned for June 18 to 24, but Love and other organizers are already busy planning and preparing students. There will no cost to any of the students or the chaperones.

There are the usual details that necessitate early planning — the lodging, the chaperones, the transportation — but there's also the Black Votes Matter club meetings, the civil rights lectures and the overnight stay at the Hope Center for Kids that the high schoolers are expected to attend before the trip.

“Well, it's not just about a great trip,” Love said. “It's about leadership development for our youth”

Love said the pre-tour events will give the high schoolers the perspective to better understand the significance of the civil rights landmarks they'll be seeing. When Love walked across the bridge in Selma where civil rights marchers were beaten by the police, he remembered how his knees shook with every step. Love hopes the high schoolers will also realize the gravity of the history and that those tremors will be translated into action.

“We're looking for future leaders that will be sensitive to, educated on and inspired by our civil rights history,” Love said.

Those potential leaders were nominated for the trip by north Omaha youth groups: Girls Inc OPS-MIHV NEXT Movement Boys, Girls Club, Project Everlast, Hope Center, Omega PsiPhi, 100 Black Men, Black Votes Matter, NAACP, HWC, South Sudanese, YouTurn, Avenue Scholars, COGIC, New Era Baptist, Baptist Ministers and IMA.

Love is confident that the nominees will be diverse by virtue of each individual club's makeup. That diversity is important to Love, because his tour isn't just an opportunity for African-Americans, he said, it's an opportunity to invest in the low-income communities that need guidance most. “Leadership isn't just about race,” Love said.

Hope Center program director Rich Blackburn will be accompanying the tour as a chaperone, and he selected four teens to come with him. He's seen how the high schoolers have puffed up with the honor of being selected and said he thinks when 40 passionate high schoolers rub shoulders with each other and with history for a week, leadership development is inevitable.

"I would be very shocked if 10 years down the road these kids weren't running for office," Blackburn said. "And not just one of them, maybe 10, maybe 20. And that's exciting to all of us." For more information call. 402-905-9305.