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## From Atlanta to Africa

- Posted by [tekono](#) on February 14, 2008 at 4:06pm in [Travel & Vacations](#)
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Click on the URL below for the video documentary and more info:  
<http://www.lifemediaprojects.org/>

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

By Chandra R. Thomas

“What happens to a dream deferred?” It’s a question poet Langston Hughes pondered nearly 60 years ago in a famous poem and one that the leaders of one Atlanta middle school grappled with when students in its graduating eighth grade class expressed their own dream — to visit Africa for their graduation trip.

"It was a wild idea, but we knew we had to make it happen for them," says Steven Jones, a social studies teacher at KIPP WAYS Academy, one of two metro Atlanta branches of an innovative national charter school program that has been featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show. "It was also extra special because this would be the first class to ever graduate from the school."

Driven by an unyielding desire to make this far-fetched dream come true for their students – many who hail from some of the city's poorest communities – school leaders immediately began brainstorming on ways to raise the more than \$130,000 needed for a nearly two-week trip to Ghana.

"A lot of Black kids grow up having such a negative view of Africa so we had been teaching them about the beauty of the continent," says social studies teacher Joseph Edelin. "We were happy to see that they wanted to visit their homeland. We knew that going there would change how they felt about Africa and themselves forever."

After months of bake sales, donation drives and even a live fundraiser with a local radio station only yielded \$40,000, the trip was nearly cancelled until Atlanta-based Delta Airlines (with the help of an Atlanta City Councilman) stepped in just before the deposit deadline and donated all 49 of the plane tickets for the kids and chaperones.

"I couldn't believe it, when they said we were going," recalls student Devonte' Render. "I couldn't believe we were actually going to Africa!"

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View photos from the KIPPWAYS trip!

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The KIPP WAYS journey to Ghana is featured in the March 2008 issue of Ebony. As the trip plans shaped up there was also some discussion about how to best capture the experience so that it could be shared with other students. Redelia Shaw, a freelance producer based in Los Angeles heard about the project through a friend, and later lobbied to school leaders to assemble a small crew to capture the journey in a documentary film, Journey Into Africa.

On a shoestring budget from her personal funds, Shaw, who also works as a substitute teacher, and her two-member crew captured the students as they engaged in once-in-a-lifetime experiences; climbing mountains, soaking in the spray of a waterfall, visiting a rainforest, meeting the first lady of Ghana and touring slave dungeons where their ancestors had been held captive centuries before.

"This experience was life-changing," says student Theresa Jones. "I have overcome the stereotype that poor Black people can't return to their roots. I understand that all Blacks in Africa aren't miserable. Africans are more joyful and peaceful without all the technology that we have in America."

Adds Shaw of the experience.

"Ultimately this experience ended up transforming into an amazing educational experience for the kids

and the adults too. There's something about being in the place where our ancestors stood, slept and bathed that is spiritual, educational and inspirational. We wanted to capture it all for others to see and learn from this experience. This story can be a phenomenal educational tool."

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This is truly inspiring!

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [hani](#) on May 12, 2008 at 1:46pm  
i am hani i will be very happy if you agree to be my friend please if you want send me on my email (haniehbh@gmail.com) thank you very mu

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [tekono](#) on May 12, 2008 at 3:39pm  
Happy to know that you liked it

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [Eric Deal](#) on May 26, 2008 at 6:19pm  
I wish you could do that for every inner city school in America. Unbelievable I love it.

[www.cafepress.com/kndredgear](http://www.cafepress.com/kndredgear)

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [Sara Zola](#) on July 9, 2008 at 7:12pm  
This is great Tekeno. I hope that the project will become a yearly event for many years to come. Bless!

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [The Face of AfriKa](#) on July 10, 2008 at 1:23pm  
Congratulations for this motivational and inspiring experience.

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [tekono](#) on July 11, 2008 at 8:36am  
Sara and FA,  
There is another documentary than is even more inspiring titled the "The Boys of Baraka". You can rent the DVD at Blockbuster or Buy it online at:

<http://lokifilms.com/site/barakanews.html>

#### FILM SYNOPSIS

"The Boys of Baraka" reveals the human face of a tragic statistic — 61 percent of Baltimore's African-American boys fail to graduate from high school; 50 percent of them go on to jail. Behind those grim figures lie the grimmer realities of streets ruled by drug dealers, families fractured by addiction and prison and a public school system seemingly surrendered to chaos. As eloquently portrayed in Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady's award-winning documentary, which has its national broadcast premiere on public television's P.O.V., a generation of inner-city children faces dilemmas that would undo most adults. In this case, they are told early on that they face three stark "dress" options by their 18th birthdays — prison orange, a suit in a box, or a high school cap and gown.

The four young boys featured in "The Boys of Baraka," despite individual talents and considerable personal charms, cannot escape the common fate expressed by those dress options. But fate, as documented in this film, comes to them with a remarkable and fickle twist — an experimental boarding school in rural Kenya.

"The Boys of Baraka" won an NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Independent or Foreign Film, as well as Best Documentary Awards at the Chicago and Newport film festivals, a special Jury Award at South by Southwest (SXSW), and Audience Awards at the Woodstock and SILVERDOCS film festivals.

Devon Brown, Montrey Moore, Richard Keyser, Jr., and Richard's younger brother, Romesh Vance, are just at that age — 12 and 13 years old — when boys start to become men. On the harsh streets of a city like Baltimore, Maryland, where the four boys live, that passage presents choices that are far more make-or-break, even life-or-death, than anything faced by their counterparts in the suburbs or the middle-class districts of the city. Will they succumb to the lure of the drug trade? Will they, against the odds, continue their education? Or one day will they simply, whether the intended target or not, stop a bullet? Given the odds against them, do these boys have the power to make a choice?

Richard speaks with charming bluster about being strong, but is troubled by his absent father's imprisonment and about his little brother's prospects growing up in the projects. Romesh is already suspicious and downbeat. Montrey is compulsively mischievous and contentious, fighting with other boys and earning multiple suspensions from school. Devon seems to have found a way:

preaching in the local church with precocious confidence while coping with his mother's repeated bouts with addiction and prison.

"The Boys of Baraka" shows that despite the most difficult circumstances, the boys can draw on the traditional strengths of the black community, church, and family. The latter may present them with a mixed legacy; the extended family pulls together to make up for members succumbing to the social blights of poverty and the drug culture. But the enthusiastic support of family and community are critical when a rare opportunity comes to the boys to join 16 other inner-city black youths in attending an experimental boarding school. Their families know instinctively that virtually any educational opportunity besides the Baltimore public schools will offer their children a lifeline — even if it is located in the rural bush land of Kenya in east Africa.

Founded by the private Abell Foundation in 1996, the Baraka School — "baraka" means "blessing" in Kiswahili, the native spoken language of eastern Africa — was designed to give "at-risk" African-American boys from Baltimore a chance to learn academically and grow personally in an environment far removed from their troubled neighborhoods. Without television, Game Boys and fast food, and exposed to the hardworking and socially rich life of rural Africans, the boys are given a more disciplined structure and the kind of educational attention (a five-to-one student-teacher ratio) normally reserved for better-heeled private schools.

The boys themselves understand that this is a chance for them to change their lives, but it's difficult to imagine 12-year-olds making a leap to rural Africa without the presence of their families and friends. In "The Boys of Baraka," the filmmakers have crafted the vérité tale of the Baraka class, including Devon, Montrey, Richard and Romesh, that left for Kenya in September 2002 for the first of two years of schooling, corresponding to the seventh and eighth grades. The overriding goal is to have the kids gain educational confidence and direction and to go on to at least graduate from high school. The Baraka School had a good record in the effort. In contrast to Baltimore's public schools, three out of four Baraka students were graduating high school.

Africa is at first both wonderful and disorienting. The boys revel in a chance to be children, discovering lizards or playing pranks without fear of gunfire. Then homesickness and discontent with the school's discipline take hold. Romesh even sets off in a futile effort to drag his pack to the distant airport. But then a transformation begins to take place.

By the time they return to Baltimore for summer vacation, they share a new enthusiasm for education and a greater confidence in their abilities. It's a striking flowering of hope, not only for the boys but also for their families. Then unexpected news comes for Devon, Montrey, Richard and Romesh and their families. How each of the boys responds to this dramatic twist of fate may be the most surprising thing about "The Boys of Baraka."

#### Behind the Lens:

Read an interview with the filmmakers and submit a question of your own »

"It was both exhilarating and sobering to follow these kids through a couple of years of grappling with one of the best breaks they may ever have," says co-director/producer Heidi Ewing. "The film zeroes in on kids that society has given up on — boys with every disadvantage — but who refuse to be 'throw-aways,'" says Rachel Grady, her directing/producing partner.

"The Boys of Baraka" is a co-production of the Independent Television Service (ITVS), produced in association with American Documentary | P.O.V.

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [faith](#) on January 17, 2009 at 5:29am

this is a great story, i hope we do this in the U.K as a lot of the Black children growing up here feel verry disconnected to Africa, partly because of all the negative media images, so they dont get to see other sides of Africa/its diversity.

I think Africans living in the west should also do more to dispel negative images of Africa by being proud of their African heritage/not changing their names to sound western ect/talking about their country.

I think the kids from Atlanta were blessed to get the opportunity to travel to Ghana.

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[Permalink](#) Reply by [tekono](#) on January 18, 2009 at 6:59am

Faith,

Image and perception of self are very important to a kids identity and thank God we are entering an era where we will see more people of african descent presented in a positive way in the media. This will help greatly in inspiring those kids to follow on the footsteps of those models. Trust me young diasporans will start touring Kenya in the coming years not for safaris but in their search for their inner political being like some of our african politicians used to tour the House of Commons and Birmingham Palace in London.or Chateau de Versailles in France.....

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