

A World of Opportunity

Unique Trips Give Students Valuable Experience

By Gary Wisby
Staff Writer

For kids in the gritty Garfield Park neighborhood, summer can be a time to hang with your friends, relax a little, maybe get shot at.

But students from Providence St. Mel School, 119 S. Central Park, have an alternative: a chance to get away from the West Side to schools such as Oxford and Harvard and places such as Paris and the woods of northern Minnesota.

This summer, more than a quarter of the 500 students at the all-black private school are enrolled in SOAL, the Summer Opportunity of a Lifetime program.

They spend from 10 days to eight weeks in courses, camps and companies. Often the program, now in its fourth year, takes kids to destinations outside the United States.

But even if they stay in Chicago, these SOAL mates are in foreign territory—learning at exclusive prep schools and universities, acquiring outdoor skills at camps and serving internships.

They pay only for books. Scholarships from host institutions provide more than half of the \$1,100-per-student cost. Fund-raising covers the rest.

When students return, said SOAL director Merrily Brannigan, "I see a confidence-building that comes from going off on your own and being able to succeed."

Kids often are surprised to find that they can hold their own in the classroom against peers with wealthy backgrounds. "And they come back with a broader view of the world," Brannigan said.

Charvis Walker, a senior, thought he was "real poor" until he spent last month in Paris. In every Metro station he encoun-

HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER

Providence-St. Mel students had these observations about their experiences in the Summer Opportunities of a Lifetime program in 1992:

"It was my first time away from home. I learned to swim and tried a lot of other activities like archery. The most important thing I learned was to respect the land."

Adam Bates,
sixth grade, Camp Thunderbird, Minn.

"I climbed the pyramid of the sun and moon, studied Spanish and learned to cook Mexican food. But maybe the best part about being away was how all my attitudes changed. I am not afraid of new places anymore."

Jennifer Israel, senior,
Phillips Exeter Academy summer in Cuernavaca, Mexico

"I thought I knew who I was before I went to Paris but I realized most of all that I needed to rely on myself—not my mom and dad. I learned that all cultures are different, and that's a good thing."

Khalilah Gates, sophomore,
OxBridge Program, University of Paris

"I think I can adapt and adjust to any situation now that I have been away. The greatest impression I have of Switzerland is how safe it is. I only saw one police car the whole time I was there."

Tavaris Fletcher, sophomore,
Leysin American School, Leysin, Switzerland

"I have never pushed myself so hard as I did during the six weeks I spent in an intensive science program at Andover. The work was very hard, but I studied hard and got A's and B's. I became self-reliant and very organized. That summer changed my life forever."

Clarence Brown, junior,
Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.

tered beggars, often accompanied by ragged children.

"That's when you realize how poor people really are," Walker said. He studied French and the history of Paris through its art and architecture in an Oxford University program.

In 1991, Felicia Lloyd studied math and science in a demanding Radcliffe-Harvard program. "I was afraid that the rich students, with more educational advantages than I had, would be smarter than me," said Lloyd, who grew up in

Cabrini-Green. "But they weren't." She finished third in her class of 40.

Lloyd spent her second summer as an intern at a Loop commodities brokerage firm. She now is studying biomedical engineering at Purdue University.

Principal Paul J. Adams said SOAL is a strong start toward his goal of establishing a 12-month school year at Providence St. Mel. "These kids are part of a global competition, and you can't catch up by taking off," he said.