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Bridgeton holds many surprises for international visitors

By JOHN MARTINS Staff Writer, (856) 794-5114

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BRIDGETON — An international group of seven visitors to the city told City Council on Tuesday night that visiting with schoolchildren in Bridgeton has opened their eyes to some of our nation's most pressing concerns, while also challenging some long-held perceptions about America and its people. Several members of the group said they weren't expecting to see the amount of socio-economic disparity they noticed in the city.

Others said they were surprised during a visit to the Broad Street School by a contrast they observed in the children, who they said had perceptive attitudes toward racism yet underdeveloped levels of self-esteem.

Selly Wane, 30, a Senegal native currently living in Germany, said after the meeting that she was astounded by the number of derelict yet occupied homes standing next to well-maintained houses throughout the city.

"Sometimes, I had the feeling that I was in a developing country and not a developed one," Wane said.

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A woman from South Africa said she was taken aback at how little headway the United States has made in coping with its heritage of slavery.

Johannesburg resident Nombulelo Khanyile, 55, said American attitudes toward slavery stand in stark relief to those in South Africa, a country that ended its long history of institutional racism against blacks just 12 years ago.

"Coming from a young democracy, it's interesting to see how your country is facing its painful history, or not confronting its painful history," she said. "In South Africa, the work that needs to be done is to figure out how to make (coping with racism) work for everyone."

"That's what I wish for America," she added. "Don't run away from your problems. America needs to know that the world looks up to them. There's a lot you can give the world if you are courageous enough to do it."

The group was brought to Bridgeton by the Washington, D.C.-based, ACTION Project, an offshoot of a 70-year-old conflict resolution organization called Initiatives of Change.

Launched two years ago, the program is a two-month experiential leadership training program that focuses on team building and diversity to help emerging leaders from around the world effect change in their communities.

The ACTION Project's weeklong stop in Bridgeton is made possible by the Bridgeton Municipal Alliance and Youth to Youth program, a city initiative headed by Karen Barnett.

Barnett brought the group to City Hall to witness local government in action, and she told council members that the group's presence in Bridgeton has had a positive impact on local schoolchildren.

"We want our students to grow up and stay in the community," Barnett said. "We want them to be

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productive. We want them to have global experiences that have nothing to do with color or ethnicity.

"It's well worth the seeds that have been planted," she added.

This year's group contains representation from Senegal, Rwanda, South Africa, Vietnam, Ukraine, Latvia and the United States. The group will be at Bridgeton High School today and will participate in various other programs before leaving for their next stop Friday morning.

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