

Over the weekend of Friday, January 16th to Martin Luther King Day, Monday, January 19th, I went to the City of Detroit for a weekend of service and learning with J-Teen Leadership. The premise, similar to many of our trips, was to provide aid to a city that had fallen on hard times. This mission lead us to experience some of the worst and best of what Detroit has to offer, and many things that are uniquely Detroit.

Our first project took us to the West Side of Detroit near 7 Mile (7 miles from downtown Detroit) to visit Bagley Elementary, a public school serving the surrounding area. We ran an activity about the words of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., which was a nice change of routine for the students. The kids were nice and the classrooms were friendly. It was tough to imagine that these kids were underprivileged.

I remember the bus ride towards the school, with block after block of nearly identical brown brick homes. I thought to myself, “Wow. If I had to live in Detroit I wouldn’t mind living here.” Upon further investigation, I was disillusioned to say that I’d live there. Some of those handsome homes were listed online for only about the cost of a nicely-equipped new Chevrolet truck. I googled Northwest Detroit and saw dozens of news stories describing crimes occurring there. The school we visited was comprised of students that lived in this gritty neighborhood and thus grew up under sometimes dangerous conditions. In a blighted city like Detroit, it is a given that some neighborhoods, specifically the poorer ones, will struggle with criminal activity. It is, however, very inspiring and indicative of a job-well-done that the local elementary school delivers a friendly environment and a wholesome education despite facing the challenges of an old building, subpar funding, and a rowdy student body.

Our next destination was another gem of the City of Detroit, The Detroit Institute of Arts Museum. We learned that during the bankruptcy proceedings of the City in 2013, the priceless art collection owned by the city was in jeopardy. Fortunately, the privatization of the collection

allowed the art to survive bankruptcy proceedings. We were lucky enough to have Diego Rivera's painted mural representing the former Detroit auto industry explained to us in great detail, which gave us a great deal of historical information about the auto industry.

We encountered a hiccup Friday night when the Downtown Synagogue, where we planned to attend Shabbat services and dinner, had problems with their boiler. Ultimately, they had to cancel services because there was no heat in the Synagogue. In an old building in a cold city, this kind of issue is something that people deal with. In this sense, dealing with this shortcoming was an experience that was, for better or worse, authentically Detroit.

Playing ice hockey at a community rink was another experience that uniquely represented Detroit and its culture. This rink is entirely community-run and staffed, which is indicative of how much Detroit residents care about the welfare of the community. And of course, during a Midwestern winter, there's nothing better to do than enjoy a game of ice hockey. It was competitive, slippery, and a wonderful way for J-Teen to spend a Saturday night.

We explored a Detroit religious community when we paid a visit to the Breakers Covenant Church, which is located in a former synagogue. We were warmly welcomed on Sunday morning by Pastor Aramis and the congregation. It was interesting to hear about their understanding of Jewish history and culture given the background of their building. The former sanctuary was a truly beautiful place with massive potential if renovated. Pastor Aramis couldn't contain his excitement about someday praying there.

In all, Detroit is a city under construction. I anticipate that it will be back soon, better than ever.