

Y.E. Smith students take D.C.

Invited by the Michelle Obama,
14 students tour the nation's capital

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As Donald visited a Wright brothers exhibit, he made an important realization.

Donald, a fifth-grader, learned the Wright brothers invented a lot of things before finally making the world's first successful airplane. The exhibit quickly became his favorite part of the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

Donald was one of 14 children who went on a two-night field trip to Washington, D.C., from March 12-14. Michelle Obama herself invited the students to the White House, providing the idea for the trip. The children met her when she visited Durham in October.

The students, ranging from third- to fifth-graders, attend Y.E. Smith Elementary School. The East Durham Children's Initiative (EDCI) organized the trip. Samantha Cole, EDCI's communications coordinator, was one of six adults who chaperoned the children.

EDCI, a nonprofit organization, works primarily in Y.E. Smith Elementary School to provide a "pipeline of services" to prepare children for college or a career, said David Reese, EDCI's president. Its target area includes 120 blocks in East Durham. Although it focuses on early childhood and elementary school, EDCI also has a presence in Neal Middle School and Southern High School.

Durham Public Schools selected Y.E. Smith to send students to greet the first

lady at the airport when she visited Durham, said Darlene Escudero, vice principal of Y.E. Smith. They quickly chose 14 students based on character, behavior and school performance.

These students met with Obama for 20 minutes in an airport room. One of them asked her when they could visit the White House, and she responded with an invitation.

A few months later, the same 14 students boarded a charter bus headed for Washington. Although all White House tours had been canceled because of budget cuts, the group still had a packed agenda for the next couple of days.

Cole, Escudero, Reese, two Y.E. Smith teachers and Barker French, the chairman of EDCI's board of directors, chaperoned the students. In addition to the National Air and Space Museum, the group visited Mount Vernon, the National Archives and the national monuments.

"They really took all the moments in," Escudero said, adding that the students were still talking about the trip at school a week later. "You can tell how impressionable the field trip was on them."

Imani Battle, a third-grader, remembers many



Samantha Cole, a staff member of the East Durham Children's Initiative, said she hopes the trip inspires the students in the long-term. One of her goals is to teach them that achievement stems from education. (Staff photo by Caitlin Owens)

things about the trip. She remembers learning how corn used to be made in a bowl at Mount Vernon. She also recalls seeing letters written by children to former presidents at the National Archives. There, the students received a private tour.

Battle felt inspired by the letters to the president she read.

"I learned that if you write a letter to the president, the president will write back to you," Battle said. "I think I'm going to write a letter to the president one day."

She already has planned out what she wants her letter to say.

"Mine's going to say, 'Dear President Obama, I think that you're the best president and I hope I get to become a president just like you,'" she said.

Although the National Archives collection includes the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence

and the U.S. Constitution, several students were most excited about sitting at a large table in the office of the archivist of the United States.

Gaspar Gelani, also a third-grader, remembers the table fondly.

"When I grow up, I want to be a boss, so I want to have one of those fancy tables," he said.

Escudero felt the trip was important not only from an educational perspective, but also because it took the students out of their neighborhood.

"Our children need to be exposed to more than just what's around them," she said. "The more you expose yourself to other points of view, the more you understand what's in front of you."

Escudero said she has already seen changes in the students. She noticed a change in the motivation of several students, even a week after returning.



Gaspar Gelani, a third-grader, enjoyed D.C. and the many museum exhibits he saw, especially at the National Air and Space Museum.