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Students travel far for lesson on human rights

ABOUT 300 Manitoba students will be heading to Washington, D.C., as part of a program to develop human rights awareness and promote volunteerism.

About 1,200 students from across Canada will attend four-day sessions there beginning this week. The trips are partially sponsored by the Asper Foundation.

Grade 9 students from 16 Manitoba schools will participate in the 2008 Human Rights and Holocaust Studies Program, said organizers, with some heading to Washington from communities as far-flung as Cross Lake and Norway House. The Asper Foundation provides about 30 per cent of students' expenses, said organizers. The program is now in its 11th year after being founded in 1997 by Israel Asper.

"What happened was when the kids were coming back, (Izzy Asper) was getting tons of cards and letters that were saying they were doing amazing things in the community. They were starting anti-bullying programs, human rights clubs, they were raising money for homelessness," said Kim Jasper, the Asper Foundation's communications director. She said the program was the seed for the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, slated to be built in Winnipeg.

"The expectation is that with the knowledge they've gained and the lessons they've learned from history, that they come back into their own communities and make changes," she said.

The program's curriculum includes 18 hours of programming focused specifically on human rights, the Holocaust and subjects like the American civil rights movement. The trip also includes visits to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and other Washington landmarks, said organizers.

The trips, taking place this week until May 28, culminate in ceremonies where students sign a document promising to support human rights. It's part of a larger commitment of 20 hours of volunteering students must do in their community upon their return, said organizers. Many schools have indicated interest in being part of the program, said Jeffrey Morry, a senior program manager for the Asper Foundation who co-ordinates the trip.

"Because the program is fairly demanding, not just from a student perspective but from an administrative perspective, schools will approach us," he said.

— Staff