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Youth Leaders Prepare For Civil Rights Pilgrimage To Alabama

Bay City News Service

Published 12:04 pm PST, Tuesday, March 3, 2020

By Angela Hill

Bay City News Foundation

OAKLAND--To see the sites where it happened, to walk in the footsteps of those who changed the course of American history - it's the opportunity of a lifetime for seven youth leaders from Oakland's Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center, and they're taking full advantage of it.

The teens will attend the 2020 Congressional Civil Rights Pilgrimage to Alabama this weekend as guests of Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Oakland, accompanying dozens of members of Congress to historic spots in Alabama that were key to the struggle for racial equality. "This means we get to see history before our own eyes, walking on those streets, walking the bridge in Selma," Jaylin Brown, a ninth-grader from San Leandro High School, said Saturday at the Freedom Center, based at Merritt College in Oakland, during a prep meeting for the trip. "We can't understand history as well if we're not there where it happened," she said.

Fayth Njenga, a senior from Kentwood in Kent, Washington, is also part of the group and joined the prep meeting via a video conference. "Being able to go on this pilgrimage is a huge privilege," she said. "No, we're not being trampled by horses or beaten by police, but we're learning from our ancestors' experiences. Plus, just being in a room with members of Congress is going to be such an opportunity to learn and teach. "We want to teach them that today's youth are ready to fight for the future," Fayth added. "We hope to leave them hopeful about what this generation can do."

Along with Jaylin and Fayth, students going on this year's trip are Ayanna Boateng, a senior from Sacramento Charter High; Jayda Gray and Ursa Kaiser, both 10th-graders from Oakland Tech High School; Ellie Lee, a senior at Alameda Science and Technology Institute; and Jennifer Hernandez, a freshman at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Washington.

The semiannual congressional pilgrimage to sites in Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, Alabama, started in 1998 by civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis of Georgia, and is a program of the Faith in Politics Institute.

Lewis, who was beaten by Alabama troopers 55 years ago while trying to march for voting rights, may attend this year's visit despite a serious cancer diagnosis in December. Supporters were delighted to see him at the annual commemorative march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma on Sunday.

Lee, a longtime participant on the pilgrimage, is the only member of Congress who regularly takes young people on the trip, said Roy D. Wilson, the Freedom Center's executive director.

"This is the 10th year we've been doing this with Congresswoman Lee," he said. "The students will get to visit places where democracy was enriched and changed in America because of the work in Selma and Montgomery and Birmingham, and we want them to go there with Dr. King's views clearly in their minds."

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