News



During their time in the U.K., students partook in traditional Fish & Chips several times, including here by the sea in Felixstowe. (Courtesy of the Washington School for Girls)

Nate Tinner-Williams

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A first-ever trip to England for a predominantly Black Catholic school in the nation's capital brought connections to history, girlhood, and the enduring educational legacy of a French Catholic nun and saint.

The Washington School for Girls, founded in 1997 by a coalition of historically White religious orders and the National Council for Negro Women, is a tuition-free school that has helped uplift Southeast D.C. with its unique model centered on both culture and faith.

Their eighth-grade trip to visit a sister institution, St. Claudine's Catholic School for Girls in London, was the brainchild of school president Dr. Beth Reaves. She first germinated the idea at a 2023 conference in Mexico that gathered educators and religious sisters affiliated with the Religious of Jesus and Mary. The order was founded in 1818 by St. Claudine Thévenet, who is now regarded as one of WSG's "founding spirits."

In London, students got to know the city by doing a scavenger hunt. One prompt asked them

In London, students got to know the city by doing a scavenger hunt. One prompt asked them to find someone to interact with who didn't speak English as their native language, which they successfully completed! (Courtesy of the Washington School for Girls)

"It's been part of our strategic plan for years," Reaves said of the trip, which began April 28 and lasted six days. It included sightseeing, cultural exchanges between the students from WSG and St. Claudine's, an exploration of Black British history, and a trip to the Convent of Jesus and Mary two hours north in Felixstowe.

At the convent, WSG was hosted by the sisters for prayer, and the girls offered a rendition of the Black national anthem, "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" — almost certainly a first for the group of English women religious.

For some students, the weeklong foray in a foreign land was their first time traveling overseas.

Aziza Walker and Makayla Broadwater assemble their artistic creations during the "Finding G

Aziza Walker and Makayla Broadwater assemble their artistic creations during the "Finding God in a Leaf" retreat exercise at the Convent of Jesus and Mary. (Courtesy of the Washington School for Girls)

"It was actually my first time on the plane as well," said Aziza Walker, who will attend Washington's Archbishop Carroll High School in the fall. She recalled especially enjoying the time with the sisters.

Khloe Norman, who is headed to Bishop McNamara High in Maryland, said her experience connecting with British students at St. Claudine's School was a particular highlight.

Gabriella Poindexter, Carleon Foma, and Trinity Hagans peruse the selection of records at On

Gabriella Poindexter, Carleon Foma, and Trinity Hagans peruse the selection of records at Onion Vinyl, and independent shop in Felixstowe. (Courtesy of the Washington School for Girls)

"It felt the same, but from a different country, and so it was fun," she said. "We actually bonded really quickly."

Norman also noted that it was important to feel closer to their founder's legacy. WSG is lay-led, though members of the RJM order and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus serve on the board.

"We have three founding spirits, and knowing that one was related to our sister school gave us more understanding of how she was as a teacher," Norman said

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Walker said it was also good to have time to relax during the trip and explore a new culture—including the adjustment to a different climate on the shores of East Anglia.

"We went to the beach, we ate fish and chips there, and it was just a fun time. It was cold. But we still had fun," she said.

The trip was financed by fundraising and fully covered for the students, who have since shared reflections at a public event with the DC Public Library and will

celebrate their graduation on Friday, June 13, in Washington.

Upon their return, students gave a presentation about their experience as part of the DC Publ

Upon their return, students gave a presentation about their experience as part of the DC Public Library's series, "Trip of a Lifetime." Makayla Broadwater shares her reflections on the cultural similarities and differences they encountered in London, particularly with their peers at the St. Claudine's Catholic School for Girls. (Courtesy of the Washington School for Girls)

Their inaugural experience overseas comes ahead of big changes for the school, with a new $25 million campus expansion set to be completed this fall. An expected increase in the student body, currently spread across two campuses, could also come with a return trip to England, though no plans are yet firm.

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"I think this felt like a really great launching point," said Annie Jensen, WSG's institutional giving coordinator, who was one of several staff members to accompany the students on the trip.

"I think we have a great structure for how we would make this a yearly thing. I think it's a goal, definitely."

This story was originally published in Black Catholic Messenger.