



The trip of a lifetime

Laker eighth grade D.C. trip an important annual tradition



Among the Laker alumni and current students is an ever-growing group of tourists who have embarked on a very significant trip to the nation's capital - a trip taken in a milestone year of completing junior high and standing on the doorstep of high school. It's a trip this group never forgets when they return home – it's talked about for years. Those in this group compare notes about their experiences, where they visited, what they enjoyed, etc.

They also can commiserate with one another – after all, they all had to wear those *hats* during the entire trip.

This is the eighth grade Washington, D.C. trip, taken in the spring of each year. This exciting trip includes stops at many historical sites: The Vietnam, Lincoln, Korean, Jefferson and World War II memorials, Pentagon City, Arlington National Cemetery and the Changing of the Guard, Iwo Jima Memorial, U.S. Capitol, National Archives, Kennedy Center, Mount Vernon, National Zoo, Toby's Dinner Theatre, Ronald Reagan Building, Washington Monument, the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum and Natural History Museum, U.S. Botanical Garden and more.

As anyone knows who has been on the trip, it's a very busy four days. Years ago, it was a three-day trip.

Laker Superintendent Brian Keim, who went on the trip in the mid-1980s, said his most vivid memories of the trip "involve brightly colored hats and Mr. Gardy 'urging' us to stay focused and keep pace with the group."

"I also remember visiting the Smithsonian and wondering how they got those airplanes and rockets to hang up in the rafters," Keim said.

In a time when field trips are being cut by many schools, having such a long-standing field trip tradition is very special. Here is a history of the eighth-grade Washington, D.C. trip, as told by those who have plenty of experience with the trip, either in participating in the trip itself or the fundraising efforts for the trip.

This article is in honor of Jack Tyler, former Laker teacher and a mainstay at many of the D.C. trips. He passed away Nov. 2, 2012.

Gordon Murphy

In his 35 years of teaching at Lakers, "Mr. Murphy" only missed three trips to Washington, D.C. Starting in the late 1980s and up until two years ago, Murphy planned every D.C. trip.

The first trip he went on was in 1977, but the first trip to D.C. was in 1976. Murphy said the idea for the eighth graders to take this trip came from then-Superintendent Jim Ballard.

Before Murphy started planning the trips, a tour company organized the trip. Murphy enjoyed planning the trips – a process that began in the fall of each year.

"We could save money by doing things ourselves," he said. "We could plan the trip (based on) what was good for our kids. We could establish when and where to do things, when was a good time to visit this and that."

Murphy said Indian Trails would recommend bus drivers, and Murphy picked these same drivers year after year for consistency. Over time, these drivers actually requested to go with the Laker group, he said.

When Murphy started planning the trip, one more day was added to the three-day excursion. Before each trip, he would do a week and a half-long unit on Washington, D.C. to help prepare students for the trip.

Murphy said the dedicated leadership of several Laker educators over the years made the trip such a success. He named Jack Tyler as one of them. Jack served as a bus leader and his wife, Sandy, was his assistant.

"Jack and Sandy Tyler were very valuable people on the trip," he said.

Murphy said he has many great memories of himself and Jack on the D.C. trip.

“We’ve shared a lot of fun and laughs,” he said.

He remembers standing with Jack and Sandy on a balcony in the hotel after all the students were tucked away in their rooms at night. They’d look at one another, sigh, and say, “That was a good day.”

Murphy also named Eileen McGee, John Blair, Ellen Roth and Julie Gettel as some other Laker staffers who served on the D.C. trips for many years.

As for himself, Murphy never got bored with going on the trip each year. After all, each year involved new students, new adventures, and sometimes, new sites to see.

“I enjoyed standing off to the side, watching the kids’ reactions (to everything),” he said.

A favorite for Murphy was the dinner theater, seeing students all dressed up.

“That’s an experience many of the kids would never have again,” he said.

Some of the most enjoyable moments for Murphy involved directing students through Arlington National Cemetery. He would take them to the section where there were newer burials, where soldiers who died in Iraq and Afghanistan were laid to rest. Sometimes, students were able to see funeral processions.

“It was completely different (than the rest of the cemetery),” he said. “There were flowers and memorials as far as the eyes could see. It really moved the kids. They realized those buried there were just a few years older than they were.”

After Sept. 11, 2001, some things changed that affected those who went on the trip.

“There was more security everywhere, more metal detectors,” Murphy said. “It actually made the trip better, once you knew what to expect.”

He said the extra security made everyone feel safer. However, there was one hassle - the White House.

“We dropped that part of the trip the last few years,” he said, noting the requirements to visit were too cumbersome to handle for a large group of people.

Murphy said he wanted every student who wanted to go to be able to make the trip because of its significance.

“It’s the most important place in the U.S. It’s the home of our government, our military, our history. This trip sticks with kids the rest of their lives,” he said.

Murphy not only carries encyclopedias full of memories in his head. He has photo albums full of pictures, including every group picture for every trip he went on.

Sandy Tyler

Sandy and Jack embarked on about a dozen trips, starting in 1979. She said Jack started going on the trip because school personnel was needed to lead student groups. After a few years, Jack became a bus leader and Sandy assisted him. They would work with the chaperones to iron out schedules, making sure everyone knew what time to be back on the bus after each stop.

“The chaperones were always really good,” said Sandy, who also has worked at Lakers and now serves as a substitute.

She said the bus drivers also were excellent and would listen to special requests.

“Jack always wanted the kids to see Ford Theater. It was downtown, and some bus drivers didn’t like to go downtown,” Sandy said.

Jack politely insisted, though, and the bus drivers were good about following through on the request.

Because the same drivers served on the trip year after year, Jack formed a bond with the driver on the bus he lead. They would play jokes together with the students. For instance, when the bus went over a bridge that a plane had crashed into years ago, Jack and the bus driver would tell the students to put their fingertips on the windows. They told the students, "You can still feel the emotion and pain of the people on the plane." They then asked the students if they could feel the pain.

"The students would say, 'No,' and Jack and the bus driver would say, 'Well, you should be able to - after all, it's a window pane,'" Sandy said with a chuckle.

One of Sandy's favorite places to visit was the National Cathedral. She said she liked to take students to the top of the cathedral so they could see an awesome view of the city.

One part about the trip Sandy didn't like was the subway.

"But the kids loved it," she said. "It was a good experience for them to try a different mode of transportation."

It was experiences like this that made the trip so important, Sandy said, especially for Laker students because they come from a rural area.

"It's a chance for the kids to get out and see the world," she said. "Once you've been to Washington, D.C., the sites have more meaning for you, rather than just seeing them on television. The TV doesn't do it justice."

Jeannine Ehrlich

Retired Laker teacher Jeannine Ehrlich went on the trip in 2003.

"It's a great experience for the kids. It's good for them to see how other people live," she said.

Ehrlich said it's especially good for the students to feel the emotion at the memorials, such as the Vietnam Memorial. She said students witness how quiet this area is and they respect the significance of what the wall means to people. Students who find names of people they know on the wall especially feel the memorial's impact.

While Ehrlich didn't go on many trips, she was involved in many of the spaghetti suppers, which were conducted for many years to raise money for the trip. The school raised \$5,000 to \$10,000 each year from this event. The junior high staffers ran the event, along with school board members. They cooked, they served, they cleaned, etc.

"The staff had fun with it," she said.

Ehrlich said each year, parents would bring in the desserts.

"There would always be one dessert that never made it out to the public - the junior high staff would eat it," she said with a laugh. "That was our reward."

When the junior high staff numbers shrunk over time, it was deemed to be too much for the smaller staff to handle the dinner, so that fundraiser stopped.

Another D.C. trip fundraiser was the skate-a-thon, which Ehrlich remembers as a very fun event. However, after some student injuries, this fundraiser ended in 1987-88.

Then, the walk-a-thon began.

"We would walk on Sand Road in Caseville out to State Park Road," Ehrlich said.

Over time, the walk-a-thon changed location to the Laker High School track.

Eighth graders also sell cookie dough to raise money for the trip.

As for her memories from the 2003 trip, Ehrlich said her favorite part was the nighttime ghost and graveyard tour at Old Town Alexandria. She said students really enjoyed this delightfully spooky site.