A Classroom of Visiting Scholars

Please alert the media: Something that makes sense is happening in Washington, D.C. Public school kids surrounded by museums and monuments are putting the ready-made learning tools to use—and actually learning.

A trip to see painter Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series at the Phillips Collection (below) is one of almost 200 outings that Matthew Wheelock will organize this year through the nonprofit group Live It Learn It. “For many kids, school is disconnected,” says Wheelock, one of four full-time staffers and tour leaders. “With the program, they see how what they’re learning is connected to their community.”

Seven years ago, Wheelock traded in a job as a lawyer for one as a fourth-grade teacher. When he learned that D.C.’s public schools rank behind those of other cities in many measures, he knew he had to do something different. He took his class to Capitol Hill for a lesson on the three branches of government—and saw his students’ enthusiasm skyrocket.

Growing up in D.C. with a public school teacher for a mother and a National Gallery of Art curator for a father was ideal for jump-starting his vision. With seed money from a local couple, Wheelock developed detailed lesson plans for trips to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Lincoln Memorial, and the Washington Monument. The group also has classes for trips to the Anacostia River, boat rides to historic forts, and visits to the planetarium. Word spread, and now fourth, fifth, and sixth graders from the neediest public schools in the District participate.

“I’m not brave enough to take my class to a museum for over an hour!” says teacher Cathy McCoy, gesturing toward her students. “But look: With Live It Learn It, what the kids learn today they’ll remember for a lifetime.”

Carol Kaufmann

Live It Learn It’s Matthew Wheelock and charges.