

Student's summer visit to Greece — a vacation that changed his life

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EAST PALO ALTO — When Ken Jones of East Palo Alto went to Greece last summer he visited the Parthenon, befriended a Greek water polo team and learned what it was like to adjust to a foreign culture.

But Sara Boyd, Ken's counselor at Menlo-Atherton High School, says Jones' trip to Greece was more than a summer vacation — it was a turning point in his life.

Boyd, who is particularly interested in the academic development of black youngsters, says Ken's three months in Greece transformed him from a high school jock into a serious student.

Like many black male students at Menlo-Atherton, Ken Jones, a football player, had put much effort into sports but neglected his grades.

"He hadn't earned top grades although he has the ability to," Boyd said. "But this year, he is working very hard. The trip was a very positive experience for him and I feel it turned him around as far as where he wants to go with his life."

Jones was one of a handful of students — and the only black student — chosen from Menlo Atherton to go overseas last summer under the sponsorship of the American Field Service (AFS). The program accepts only one out of every 12 applicants.

The day he found out he had been accepted by AFS, Jones recalls, "it was like a dream."

To increase his chances of acceptance, Jones had not listed a preference on his AFS application for where he wanted to go. He was surprised, however, when he was assigned to Greece.

"I had read about Greece, but I didn't know a lot about it, to be honest," Jones said.

While in Greece, Jones lived with three different families, mostly around Athens. He learned to make simple conversation in Greek and to eat large lunches and small dinners.

He vacationed on the island of Skiros, attended a Greek baby shower and a Greek wedding, which he describes as "really different" from American weddings.

There are few black people in Greece, and Jones said he was frequently mistaken for being a South African.

When he told people he was an American and they wanted to talk about politics, Jones said he would change the subject.

"To avoid conflicts about the U.S. government, I'd



Times Tribune photo by Sam Forencich

Ken Jones returned from a summer's visit to Greece with a new appreciation for the academic aspects of high school.

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just tell people I didn't know anything about it," he said. "Greek people tend to get angry over little things. Not me. If I can avoid an argument, I'll do so."

Jones, a lifelong resident of East Palo Alto, believes his trip overseas made him a "more mature person." His ambition now is to attend a four-year college and eventually to go into business.

But first, Jones would like to open a school for teenagers who are having trouble finding a direction in life, "to keep kids in the right direction once they get out of junior high."

Jones himself said he had trouble finding a direction in his freshman year at Woodside High School. "I got turned around the wrong way. I started cutting class and not doing my homework. A lot of my friends did it, too," he said.

The following year, Jones transferred to Menlo-Atherton and improved his performance.

Boyd said that many students, particularly black males like Jones, have trouble adjusting to the academic load of high school.

"Ken is a very bright young man and I feel he has a bright future," said Boyd, who encouraged Jones to apply for AFS.

"But so many of our students, black boys in particular, tend to let sports dominate and even though they're bright, they don't take courses that will get them into college."

Boyd, who runs a program at Menlo-Atherton that encourages minority students to take math and science, said she is very concerned that black athletes tend to take "Mickey Mouse" courses in high school and college and eventually end up with few job skills.

Boyd admits she is "not very popular" with many students.

"How do you keep a young boy from believing that he can become another O.J. (Simpson)?" she said.

"Coaches want students to win, but my emphasis is getting students into colleges and universities. I feel very strongly that sports are exploited as far as black students are concerned. Instead of spending four or five hours a day on football or basketball, I encourage students to split it up and give half that time to sports and half the time to their studies."