

EHS Students Create Documentary on Bias in Textbooks

Shortly after Paul Igaz -- Encinal Jr. Sr. High School's Digital Filmmaking teacher -- learned that a family friend had purchased the Whitney Plantation located outside of New Orleans, an idea hit him. The new owner, John Cummings III, was creating a radically different kind of tour – one that would focus on the brutal experience of slaves rather than the genteel experience of plantation families.

And Igaz thought his students might be able to do something similar.

The veteran teacher approached colleague Kevin Gorham, who teaches radio broadcast and AP History teacher at EJSJS. Together, the two educators hatched an ambitious plan to take their multimedia students to New Orleans so they could explore and document the lives of enslaved Africans and compare it to what they had learned about slavery in textbooks and popular culture. After setting up a Kickstarter campaign to raise \$12,000 to fund a 10-day trip, the teachers and their students flew to New Orleans.

The students spent several days exploring what one student described as the “glitz, glamor, and flashing lights” of this vibrant city. Then they delved into the shadow side of the region, by first visiting the Hurricane Katrina Memorial (where they learned about the city’s contemporary issues with race and poverty), and then traveling to the Whitney Plantation. There, Cummings and other guides led the students on an in-depth plantation tour that focused on the brutal treatment endured by enslaved families.

The EJSJS students chronicled their journey in a 27-minute documentary called “Beyond the Book.” The documentary includes interviews with the students, local historians, Cummings, and other staff at the plantation and deftly shows how the students come to understand how the plantation system and racism in a whole new way. “The experience is invaluable,” one student says. “We can learn things online or in a textbook. But that’s not the same as being at the actual place and experiencing it.”

The students had planned to premiere the documentary this past March at a local nursing home, where Mr. Gorham's mother and a historian interviewed in the documentary now live. But once COVID-19 hit, the students had to cancel their plans. Alameda Theatre has said it is interested in showing "Beyond the Book" once theaters can open again. But in the meantime, you can watch the documentary [here](#).

"By examining the roots of slavery in our country - and comparing the truth to how this history is taught in the textbooks – the students gained a deeper understanding about how that unspoken history contributes to the race relations in the country today," Gorham says.