

Cultural sharing benefits students, adults

■ African Americans in Miami-Dade are forging links with Africa through cultural exchanges and other programs aimed at generating more awareness of one another.

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Growing up in Overtown and playing with his friends, Robert Ingram always wanted to be Tarzan of the movies, a white man, never the Africans.

"You tell me," Ingram said, "what is wrong with that picture?"

Ingram started to make the picture right for himself in 1991 when he adopted the African name Nna Ndi Ibo — "Father of the Ibos" — in a naming ceremony conducted by a Nigerian group in the Miami area.

Later, as vice chairman of the Miami-Dade County School Board, he was well placed to do even more.

"A lot of what children here know about Africa is demeaning," he said. "To leave it like it is creates a potted plant effect, where there is no growth at all. A tree is only as strong as its roots. It's important for our students to understand their roots. I think they gain strength of character when they are rooted and grounded in their ancestral history."

His answer: a "strong infusion" of Africa through a Rites of Passage program that he persuaded the School Board to endorse in 2001.

The program, conducted in partnership with the Foundation for Democracy in Africa, focuses on grades 1, 6 and 9 at Carol City elementary, middle and high schools.

As part of the program, Carrington Bester, 15, a sophomore at Carol City High, and Angela Youngblood, 39, a fifth-grade teacher at Carol City Elementary, in early October spent 10 days in the African nation of Rwanda, visiting a sister school.

Erhabor Ighodaro, Ingram's administrative assistant, and Anthony Okonmah, executive director of the Foundation for Democracy in Africa, a Washington, D.C.-based, nonprofit organization, accompanied them.

But the Rites of Passage program is not the only one



SHARING IDEAS: Carol City Elementary teacher Angela Youngblood, second from left, clockwise, and Miami Carol City High student Carrington Bester discuss education matters with school officials in Rwanda. At the head of the table is Anthony Okonmah, executive director of the Foundation for Democracy in Africa.



MARSHA HALPER/HERALD FILE PHOTO

DOING HIS PART: Robert Ingram, vice chairman of the Miami-Dade County School Board, persuaded the board to endorse the Rites of Passage program. It's designed to teach African culture.

that seeks to put African-Americans in Miami-Dade in touch with the continent.

Sandrell Rivers, area-wide

supervisor of the arts for Miami-Dade Parks and Recreation Department, first visited Africa in 1994 when she

attended Panfest in Ghana.

Additional trips to Africa and visits here by Africans led to Rivers forming Africa

Reconnect in December 2002.

And even earlier, Florene Nichols was taking students in her Inner City Touring Dance Company to perform in Africa. The first group of 30 went in 1987, after preparing its routine for a year, combining Western dance like hip-hop and ballet with traditional African dance.

Nichols was surprised at how similar the cultures are. She believes the visits have allowed the children to learn about Africa and return with a better appreciation of their cultural heritage, creating a bond with the continent.

This desire among African-Americans to rediscover their roots gained momentum with the creation of Kwanzaa in 1966, according to Edmund Abaka, a University of Miami history professor. The annual celebration, from Dec. 26 to Jan. 1, was created by Maulana Karenga, professor and chairman of Black Studies at California State University, to provide an opportunity for African Americans to celebrate their heritage.

"There is a trend toward increased awareness, a strong urge to go back to the motherland," said Abaka, who also takes students on educational trips to Africa. "What has to happen is a strong infusion in the curriculum of African history, politics and economics."

The Rites of Passage program is one answer, with its curriculum, after-school/mentoring and "village" components.

The curriculum, designed by the school district's Social Science Division, introduces students to the historical, geographical, political, cultural and intellectual heritage of Africa.

After-school mentoring allows children to have firsthand experiences with elders. The mentors undergo Rites of Passage training and give narratives, lectures and cultural demonstrations in areas such as dress, drama, cuisine, music and art.

The village component is taken from the African saying, "It takes a village to raise one child." Every second Saturday of the month, all those involved in the program — students, teachers, mentors,

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