

Page: Achievement Award
Category Best Diversity Initiative
Chapter St. Louis Chapter
Chapter Size Mid-Sized (301-850 members)
Entry Title Underground Railroad Tour
Entry Description <p>In October of 2021, ACC-St. Louis's Bridges Group, a sub-group of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, hosted a private, two-hour guided shuttle tour of sites in Alton and Godfrey, Illinois that are believed to have been used by the Underground Railroad. Bridges is a group of racially diverse members of the St. Louis Chapter who engage in various activities, such as attending a relevant concert, play, art exhibit, or movie together, discussing a relevant book, or dining with each other in restaurants specializing in various ethnic cuisines, the purpose of which is to have respectful and open communication that crosses racial and cultural divides and to develop friendships and a stronger community.</p> <p>The tour was led by professor and historian J.E. Robinson, who educated the group on the significance of the Underground Railroad in that part of Illinois. The Underground Railroad was a network of people who offered shelter and aid to enslaved African Americans escaping bondage from the slave state of Missouri and other states in the South to seek freedom in Northern free states (including Illinois) and Canada. It is believed as many as 100,000 enslaved people escaped via the Underground Railroad. Alton's location on the Mississippi River played a vital role in helping the enslaved make connections to escape to freedom more than 150 years ago.</p> <p>Attendees visited sites throughout Alton and Godfrey where escaped slaves took refuge as they worked their way to freedom, while Professor Robinson told stories of the escaping slaves and what they might have gone through, including legal aspects of becoming free, and about those in the area who helped the enslaved in their journey to get to a free state. The sites visited included a basement tunnel in what is now an Alton apartment building, Rocky Fork Church, which purportedly was the first stop in a free state for escaped slaves leaving Missouri, and Union Baptist Church, which is considered one of the first Black churches in Illinois.</p> <p>After the tour, the group, which consisted of Bridges members and their guests, gathered at a local micro-brewery for lunch and to discuss the experience and socialize.</p>
When was the program initiated? 10/16/2021
What was the project objective? To provide a unique and meaningful experience for Bridges members to connect with one another while learning more about those who were involved in the Underground Railroad and its great significance in the history of our area and country.
How was the objective achieved? Attendees were all very moved by the tour and the stories they heard and seemed to have a sense of having shared an important and meaningful experience with one another. The gathering after provided an opportunity to reflect and share thoughts with one another about the experience, and also to unwind and just have some fun together, as well.
What was the project budget? Approximately \$1,000, which covered the cost of the private tour, the tips to the tour guide and shuttle driver, as well as food and beverages at the microbrewery.
What obstacles were faced while doing this project/program? The pandemic, of course, causing the event to be postponed until more than a year after it was originally planned to occur. The event also had to be planned on a Saturday, and Alton is a 30-40 minute drive from St. Louis, so not everyone who would have liked to were able to attend. It was such a successful event, however, that the group is currently planning a second tour for those who missed out.
In 300 words or less, please state how this project was innovative. Providing such a unique opportunity for members to attend a private, guided shuttle tour outside of St. Louis, where they were able to experience such an important part of our history up close and personal, had never been done by ACC St. Louis before. Since it was a Saturday afternoon event, and such a unique event, members were invited to bring a guest or family member with them, which is unusual for an ACC St. Louis event and helped to make the event more personal and special. Most importantly, the subject matter of the Underground Railroad is deeper and more meaningful and personal than the law-related topics that might be typical subject matter for most other ACC events.

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