

The early arrivals

Students in Groups get a summer's jump on life on the IU campus

by Steve Hinnefeld
Hoosier Times
August 27, 2006

BLOOMINGTON - Two hundred ninety-six new students at Indiana University dived head-first into the college experience this summer in the Groups program.

They worked hard. They played hard. They trudged to class in 95-degree heat, grabbed a few minutes of sleep when they could and revived to work and play some more.

The first-generation college students got a crash course in the expectations - and temptations - of college. They lived the motto: "Groups '06, get in the mix."

Making friends

Jazmiin Brown followed her older sister, Kavonjalia, from Indianapolis to IU and the Groups program.

"I thought it would be a good opportunity to understand what college would be," she said.

It's been that and more. She and Yannicka Ghoston, an Indianapolis North Central friend and her IU roommate, threw themselves into activities and ended the summer ready for the fall but exhausted.

Brown is quiet, friendly and close to her mother and younger brother. She admits to old-school tastes: Al Green's "Love and Happiness" is on her voice-mail greeting.

She plans to study sports management at IU. Ghoston, outgoing and analytical, will major in business. Both women want to minor in Spanish and study abroad.

Groups students keep busy with courses in writing, math and critical reading. Brown and Ghoston added an elective: a music, dance and spoken-word production called "Brothers and Sisters in Celebration." They said the schedule made them experts in time management, possibly the most valuable skill they learned.

"I think the play was so critical," Brown said. "It took all our time. I think it will be easy to manage a job and homework and everything."

The other lesson was that it's possible and worthwhile to make friends from different backgrounds.

"You meet so many diverse people in college that are not like you but you can learn so much from them," Ghoston said.

Service

Brittney Paulk plans to major in psychology and take requirements for studying physical therapy. But her career goal is something different.



Groups students Gzurjuan Fears-Neal, left, and A.J. Medley-Griffin hang out during a planning meeting.
Jeremy Hogan | Hoosier Times

"I actually want to be a firefighter," she said.

One day when she was in high school, she was home, talking on the phone, when she heard a crash. She called 911 and rushed outside. A car had struck a motorcycle.

"I was the first one on the scene," she said. "This guy, his legs are literally bent to his shoulders. He's just screaming and the motorcycle's on top of him."

Firefighters arrived soon, and Paulk was impressed with how they took control. She was also surprised at how calm she remained amid the chaos.

"It was that traumatic experience that set off what I wanted to be," she said.

Paulk smiles constantly - so much, she said, that sometimes her cheeks hurt. She carries herself with the relaxed grace of an athlete: She played soccer and basketball and threw the shot and discus at Mishawaka High School.

As female vice president of the Groups Hall Council - there's also a male vice president to make sure both women and men are represented - she got students involved in community service. They painted a mural at Shalom Community Center, helped at the Habitat for Humanity Restore and put on costumes for the "superhero splash" with kids at Bryan Park Pool.

Students signed up to help, then sometimes found they didn't have time or energy to follow through. But Paulk hopes service will become a part of future Groups summer programs.

"It was kind of hectic," she said, "but I think making an effort to do these projects just kind of tipped for other community service projects to happen."

Academics

Anna Biehn says she's not a typical Groups student. Then again, she probably isn't a typical IU student.

She reads serious books. She likes baseball and plays the mellophone. She's happy getting lost in the crowd.

"My focus, honestly, is academics," she said.

Biehn grew up in Nashville and knew about Groups because her older sister, Larkin, now an IU senior, was in the program.

She followed, "basically for financial reasons."

The Groups summer program engages students with college life through relentlessly programmed activities: sports, contests, parties and meetings. The approach works for most, but Biehn felt all the activity was wasting her time. She preferred studying at the library and exploring campus with a few friends.

She had no trouble with her courses and felt classes at Brown County High School prepared her well.

"Coming out of high school, I wondered," she said. "But being here makes me realize what a good high school I went to."

Biehn said the best thing about the summer program was getting to know IU.

"I love Bloomington," she said. "It's big enough that it's enough of a change, but it's not overwhelming."

She's interested in journalism and political science, and the small classes, she said, let her get to know her instructors and start thinking about graduate school. She became friends with classmates in her Groups writing seminar, including immigrants who told their stories in the essays the students shared.

"It was amazing to read about the different experiences that people have, where they're coming from," she said.

Performance

A.J. Medley-Griffin started doing stand-up comedy at an early age.

"I was the class clown," he said. "God gave me the gift of gab."

When he first performed in public at 13, the audience booed. So he went home and studied the masters on video, then emerged as a confident stand-up artist three years later.

"I have like seven hours of Richard Pryor in my head," he said. "I studied him more than anybody."

A counselor steered him toward IU's Groups program when he was a freshman at Lawrence Central High School. Medley-Griffin lived in Detroit until he was 6, then moved to Indianapolis.

"I still claim Detroit as my hometown," he said. "That's where all my family's at."

He said studying telecommunications at IU will help him learn about production values and the media business, a plus for his performing career. And he milked the Groups summer experience for all it was worth, getting elected Halls Council male vice president, DJing late-night parties and playing a lead role in "Brothers and Sisters in Celebration."

"I involved myself in too many things," he said at the end of summer classes. "It hurt my grades a little bit."

It apparently didn't hurt his grade in the elective class that produced "Brothers and Sisters in Celebration." Deadra Nelson-Mason, its director, gave Medley-Griffin top billing at an Aug. 3 Groups awards banquet, calling "an outstanding performer and, I hope, a budding actor on this campus."

Medley-Griffin for once didn't have a lot to say.

"What I will say is, thank God we made it," he said.

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Anna Biehn, of Nashville, left, and Sarah Fargo, of Bloomington, attend a Groups English writing class. Chris Howell | Hoosier Times

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