



# A TEEN ROAD TRIP WITH A

Public school bus driver Tanya Walters gives 22  
Los Angeles kids a life-changing chance to see America  
BY KRISTEN MASCIA | PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON HAVIV

# MISSION





**'MOMMA T' AND HER KIDS, ARIZONA, JULY 18** "She's like my second mom," says Freddy of Walters. "She looks out for me."

n a clear June afternoon, 17-year-old Freddy Blackshire stood at the ledge of the Grand Canyon and gazed across the chasm. He was 500 miles from his Inglewood, Calif., home near "the Jungle"—a crime-ridden labyrinth of low-income apartment buildings and dark alleys—and a world away from a troubled life that nearly ended two years ago when a bullet pierced his back in a drive-by shooting. "That was a sight," he says of the canyon later. "Water can do that to rocks? It looked like it didn't even stop. And it's just been there for so long, centuries. It's—what's the word? I can't even get it."

Delighted, astonished, speechless—a reaction shared by thousands of kids who flock to the Grand Canyon with their families for summer vacation. But

that majestic view was something of a miracle for Freddy and 21 other teens from the Los Angeles area who saw the Grand Canyon, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., and many other sights on a unique three-week bus trip. The miracle worker behind the journey: Tanya Walters, who at 38 is something of a natural wonder herself. Tall and slim, the loud, joke-cracking widowed mom of a 13-year-old boy has, for the past 17 years, driven a yellow bus for the Los Angeles Unified School District. She's also the head of Godparents Youth Organization ([www.godparentsyouthorga.nization.org](http://www.godparentsyouthorga.nization.org)), the nonprofit she founded in 2005, with the help of some fellow school bus drivers, to take kids like Freddy on trips that, she hopes, will expand their views of life and them-

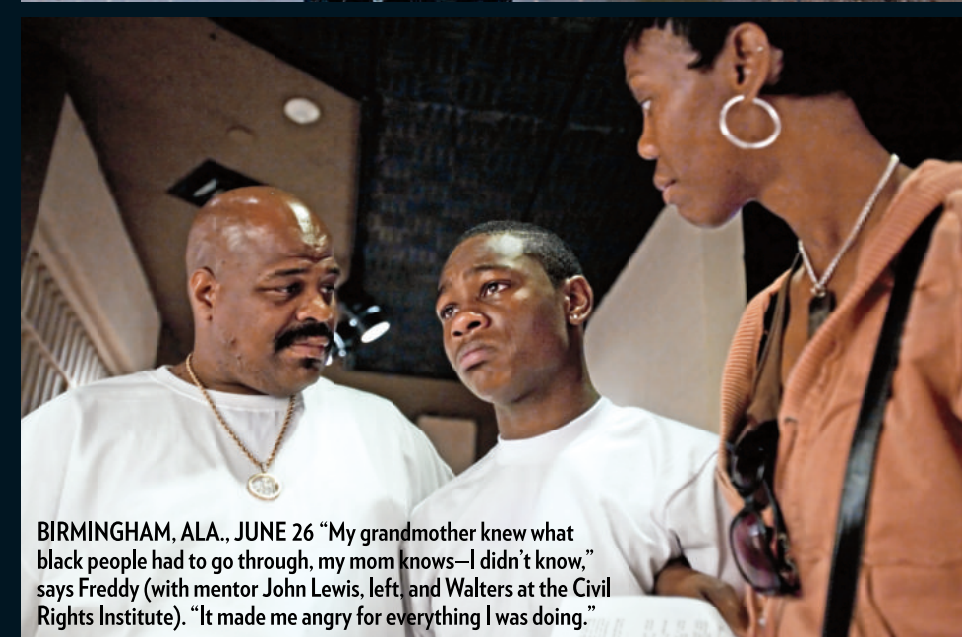
selves. "I want these kids to dream," she says. "We want to help them believe they can do anything and show them that despite their circumstances, there's a life to live out there."

Such lofty goals were far from Walters' mind on June 22 as she prepared for departure at the Stentorian Fire Station in South Los Angeles, calming worried parents, triple-checking her to-do lists and reviewing bus rules with the kids and seven adult mentors, who act like surrogate parents on the trip. "I won't take attitude problems," Walters warns, citing her policy of sending rule-breakers home on a Greyhound bus. "I'll call Greyhound on you, 1-800-231-2222." After stowing his suitcase and hugging his mother, Cyrille Cooper, 42, Freddy took his seat on the Pacif-

ic West charter bus. Also aboard was Marquise Foster, 16, who lost his father in a gang-related shoot-out when he was 6 and who hopes to attend Howard University; Tambaurlon "Tam" Miller, a 14-year-old eager to see New York, who says she's afraid to go out in her neighborhood because "there are rapists" around; and Nalshannae "Chocolate" Farmer, 18, a girl with a history of fighting who had never been out of L.A. and who was so determined to go on the trip that she raised the \$500 fee by asking teachers for donations. All the kids were handpicked by Walters after writing essays about challenges they'd faced and why they wanted to go. "Before I was bad," Chocolate says. "People said the trip would change me, and I want to change."



**NEW ORLEANS, JULY 14** "There were trains upside-down, and a car caught on the fence from when the water got so high," says Christyanna Hewett, 14. "I felt upset about it."



**BIRMINGHAM, ALA., JUNE 26** "My grandmother knew what black people had to go through, my mom knows—I didn't know," says Freddy (with mentor John Lewis, left, and Walters at the Civil Rights Institute). "It made me angry for everything I was doing."

## THE TRIP AT A GLANCE

Twenty-two teens, 21 states, 26 days. From the Grand Canyon to Niagara Falls, New York City to New Orleans, Walters and her kids covered a lot of ground. Here's a look at some of their stops:







WASHINGTON, D.C., JULY 1 “They get on the bus scared little kids,” says Lewis, “and get off confident kids.” (Tam, left, and Kaila Perry at the Lincoln Memorial.)

“I want these kids to dream. We want to help them believe they can do anything” —TANYA WALTERS

So does Freddy. With his father out of his life for years, his main support has come from Cooper, an income-tax preparer and single mother of four, who signed Freddy up for karate and gymnastics. “He was always doing flips off the furniture,” she recalls. By age 14, however, Freddy began to lose interest, and one Tuesday afternoon in May ’05, he told his mom he didn’t want to go to practice. Instead, he went to hang out across the street; minutes later, Cooper heard a sound like firecrackers. Looking out, she saw a van drive by, spraying bullets—and her son on the ground. “He had tried to run away and they shot him in the back,” she says. The bullet missed Freddy’s spine by just a few inches, and he recovered.

But he was different after the shooting. “He became quiet, reserved—he shut me out,” Cooper says. “I felt like I didn’t know him anymore.” Not long after, she learned he was smoking pot daily and hanging out with friends in gangs. And though he swore he wasn’t a gang member himself, Cooper had

her doubts: “At one point I called the Inglewood police gang unit and asked if they had my son’s name in their file. And they did.” Last February, Freddy was arrested for marijuana possession and kicked out of school.

The trip offered Freddy a chance for a fresh start—something he desperately wants. “I wanted to get away,” he

says. “I’ve gotta turn my life around.” He was hoping to pick up where he left off in December 2006 when he went on his first trip with Walters to New Orleans after hearing about her from his mother, who attends Walters’ church. Since 2005 Walters has led two other major trips. All have been funded through donations—and Walters’ credit card. “I found my purpose,” she says. “You do what it takes. To see the transformation [in the kids], this is the essence of enjoying life.”

In the South the group stopped in



NEW YORK CITY, JULY 5 After a ride through Times Square, the teens ate pizza, toured N.Y.U. and went shopping. “I love New York,” says Skykenda Collins (far left, with Selesta Shurney, center, and Tyearea Pettus).



“I’ve got a lot of new friends. And I know the sky is the limit. If I believe in myself, I’m gonna make it” —CHOCOLATE FARMER

Jackson, Miss., and Montgomery and Birmingham, Ala., where they visited the Civil Rights Institute. There, Freddy found himself face-to-face with an authentic Ku Klux Klan robe. Fists clenched, he froze. “I was staring into the eyes for about five minutes,” he says, “and it made me angry.” Walters and mentor John Lewis, 39, took Freddy aside. “You’re mad and bent out of shape at the KKK,” Walters told him. “But what are you doing when you’re fightin’ or shootin’ or beatin’ up somebody who’s wearing red or blue?” Later, Walters explains, “he was fighting with himself. He came face-to-face with himself.” That night, Freddy called his mother. “He said, ‘Mom, I [saw] all the sacrifices [Civil Rights crusaders] made, and I’m not appreciating it,’” Cooper recalls. “And I’m

on the phone thinking, ‘Is this my son?’” Freddy’s emotion touched other kids. Says Chocolate: “The moment I remember most was Freddy crying at the museum. After he told me his life story, I was like, he’s been through a lot. And we became, like, best friends.”

For Marquise, a high point of the trip was a campus tour of Howard. And for many, their walk around New Orleans’ Ninth Ward was eye-opening. At the Boys & Girls Club where they bunked the previous night, Freddy, Marquise, Tam, Chocolate and others stayed up painting a colorful mural on the wall, finishing at 7 in the morning. “It was Freddy’s idea,” says Marquise. “That was a big moment for a lot of us, because we all came together. One

man’s dream, all nine of us helped do.”

By the time the bus pulled back into the South Los Angeles fire station July 18, the kids were itching to get off. Freddy hugged Walters, several mentors and new friends Chocolate and Tam. Then he hugged his mom and took off with a cousin. Later, Walters reflected on what lies ahead for Freddy. “It’s going to be a struggle,” she says, “because you can take a person out of it, but when they go home, they’re in the same environment. We have planted the seed, but it’s up to them.” A few days later, Freddy is wistful for life on the bus: “I wish I could go back,” he says. It’s summertime, and trouble is all around. So he thinks about fall, when he plans to go back to school, graduate and get out for good. “It’s like, Fred, you gotta get out. Get my mom and my brothers and get away from this,” he says. “There is help out there and we can get out. We can get away.” ●

Know a hero? Send suggestions to [HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM](mailto:HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM)



NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y., JULY 9 “The waterfall, the rainbow—everywhere I turned it was pretty!” says Chocolate Farmer.