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EDUCATION

# Summer Camp Liberty Village visits the National Aquarium as part of Field Trip Fridays

By Alecia Taylor  
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Students from the Liberty Village Project enjoy a visit to the National Aquarium through the Field Trip Friday program, a summer offering by the Baltimore City government and local nonprofit organizations. July 28, 2023 (Barbara Haddock Taylor/Baltimore Sun)

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Summer school students from the Liberty Village Project were able to escape Baltimore's **heat waves** and dive into the National Aquarium as a part of Field Trip Fridays.

Around 30 summer school students and their teachers visited the National Aquarium Friday as part of a grant-funded program that takes nonprofit organizations on field trips around the city. At the beginning of the summer, Baltimore City nonprofit youth organizations were invited to request tickets to extend their summer programs an extra day to explore some of Baltimore's cultural institutions.

When the students were asked how many of them had visited the aquarium before, a majority of their hands shot up, but some shouted they had never been.

"A lot of our inner city youth have never left their neighborhoods. This gives them an opportunity to meet other folks, other folks and seeing and being exposed to, not only just the fish, but a different lifestyles," said Simon Edwards, a junior NBA coach at Liberty Village. Edwards has been working with the project for almost a year teaching fundamentals of basketballs and life skills.

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A majority of the students come from the West Baltimore area. Edwards was excited to expose his student-athletes to different parts of the city and its offerings. As their coach, Edwards said he tries to talk to them about looking for careers outside of just sports. "We try to encourage other careers. This is nice [being able to] expose them to [...] something great and give them ideas to live their dream."

Before the start of the visit, the students gathered around the aquarium entrance, some talking with one another, others talking with the aquarium staff and Councilman Zeke Cohen about the aquatic animals they were excited to see.

Joseph Lee, 16, is a summer school camper at Liberty Village, who has been to the aquarium before. He found himself touching one of the Atlantic horseshoe crabs, but this time a different part of the animal than last time.



Ms. Tiffany West and her class marvel at an exhibit in the National Aquarium. (Alecia Taylor)

Taliah Johnson, 12, is in Timothy Banks' and Tiffany West's group working within the school's greenhouse. As the group made their way through the rainforest part of the aquarium, Taliah was able to recognize the organisms growing on the plants in the exhibit.

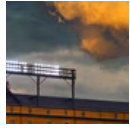
"At first it was a little weird!" she said. "But then I saw stuff that I've seen before. I'm definitely coming back!"

Her teacher, Mr. Banks, and class aide Ms. West worry the students may not remember the lessons they go over from their greenhouse campus, but the field trip allowed some like Taliah to see the plant cycle in different stages in a more natural habitat.

"It was nice seeing things through their eyes," said Mr. Banks.

At the greenhouse where Mr. Banks and Ms. West teach, campers learn how to grow plants and the plant life cycle. Ten out of 18 of their students attended the field trip.

“This is a great idea doing this,” said Ms. West. “A lot of kids don’t get a chance to experience stuff like this. This kind of opens their eyes to new things, see new things and learn new things. I can even learn new things.”



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Since 2021, the city has operated summer programs four days a week, Monday through Thursday, to prevent teacher burnout. With the youth curfew and a shorter summer school week, local residents questioned where Baltimore City’s youth could turn to for safe and engaging environments.

In May, the program “**Field Trip Fridays**” was implemented as a compromise for the shorter school week by Councilman Zeke Cohen. Although Cohen credits the program as a partnership between the city and the school district, the school system emphasized that the program was his initiative in a [tweet](#) .

In a collective effort with Baltimore’s Promise and the Fund for Educational Excellence, Field Trip Fridays was able to come to fruition, servicing 700 students in summer school programs. It is funded by grants, some of which came from the Baltimore nonprofit Open Society, and were split into microgrants of \$1,500 to pay for lunches and busing, according to Cohen.

Tickets to these trips were donated directly by the 11 community institutions such as The National Aquarium, which has donated 250 tickets.

Another institution, Port Discovery Children’s museum, donated 500 tickets to the initiative to disperse among the students and their families.

“We’re a resource for children and families in Baltimore, Baltimore City, but also the surrounding counties, and we sort of like to make sure that our space is accessible and welcome for everyone,” said Carter Arnot Polakoff the president & CEO of Port Discovery.

“It’s just been this really beautiful thing, seeing cultural institutions come together to support our kids,” Cohen said to The Baltimore Sun. He pointed out that **Baltimore’s Promise**, a nonprofit organization that coordinates youth summer collaboratives, has been the backbone to this summer’s weeklong engagements. “We’ve just been really excited because I think it represents a spirit of collaboration that sometimes our city struggles with, but to see people really embrace this culture of collaboration has been very heartening.”



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