

After struggling with her identity for decades, N.J. woman wants to help Black youth explore heritage

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Shazel Muhammad-Neain created the African Link Initiative, as a way to educate and empower Black youth. Provided by Shazel Muhammad-Neain

By [Brianna Kudisch | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

When Shazel Muhammad-Neain was growing up, she experienced racism time and time again: classmates at school rejected her, her grandfather was attacked, a cross was burned in her front yard.

The childhood discrimination, and later on, racial discrimination in the corporate world, played a large role in Muhammad-Neain's adult life, as she grappled with her identity as a Black woman.

"I became African-American for the first time at age 47," she told NJ Advance Media. "(Identity) has been a struggle ever since I've been a little girl."

Appreciating her identity only happened after Muhammad-Neain learned more about her background several years ago — she spent more than a month in Ghana and Kenya, received her DNA results from her maternal line, and researched her ancestors.

And the knowledge she gleaned from her experiences inspired her to create a similar program for Black youth in Mercer County. The [African Link Initiative](#), or ALI, is a three-part identity development program that culminates in a birthright trip to Ghana.

"Because if I could've reconciled my identity challenges as a kid, I think my life would've been different," Muhammad-Neain said. "And I think I would've been strengthened by that."

Designed to educate Black teenagers about their culture and provide curriculums for skill-building, ALI is a pilot program of Eunoia Global, a leadership training and coaching firm founded by Muhammad-Neain.

Launching virtually in January 2021, the first class of ALI will include a maximum of 20 high schoolers, although eighth-graders may be accepted in special circumstances, Muhammad-Neain said. Students must sign up to participate, and there is an initial parent meeting. Once enrolled, students will meet twice a week virtually.

The program includes three distinct parts: a DNA ancestry test, provided by [African Ancestry](#), skill-building activities, provided by [VitalSmarts](#), and a final teen summit dialogue and family reunion event.

The two-week Ghana trip will tentatively happen in July or August, pending the state of the [coronavirus pandemic](#). Ghana is a more common country Black youth have ancestors from, in part because of its location on the coast where slaves were captured, Muhammad-Neain said. Muhammad-Neain is collaborating with the Boys & Girls Clubs of Mercer County for the students to participate in the program. Students in the organization are the program's "target youth," she said.

African Ancestry donated the DNA kits and Muhammad-Neain said she and her husband have paid for the curriculum and other program costs, with only the Ghana trip requiring additional funds.

She said the program is exploring fundraising options through grants, scholarships, and other donations. The trip is approximately \$6,000 per student, Muhammad-Neain said, which includes everything from meals to the airfare.

They recently received a faith-based grant from the state, but they do not expect the teenagers to pay for the trip, she added. "That's what stops a lot of these opportunities," she said.

Muhammad-Neain said she hopes the program helps instill cultural pride in the participating students. The program's structure is also based on academic research that shows improved outcomes from the curriculums they are using, she said, with increased graduation rates.

“Every dollar that we raise here out for this program goes to get the kids to Ghana,” she said. A [GoFundMe campaign](#) for the program has raised more than \$4,000 out of a \$100,000 goal. The program recently had its first student meeting and currently has three students enrolled. Muhammad-Neain said her goal is 10 to 15 students.

Having knowledge of her own background and ancestors’ lives helped Muhammad-Neain become more resilient and fearless, she said. She hopes to inspire the same strength in the students who participate in the program.

“I never experienced anything that bad, like slavery,” she said. “What can’t I do in the world that I live in?”