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Photos by ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

Student adviser Adam Courtman photographs Earth Works Garden on May 16 during the Detroit Culture Bus Tour. The aim is to help U-M staff get to know the city better.

BIG CITY, NEW VIEW

Tour gives U-M staff an education about Detroit

By ALEX P. KELLOGG
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

From the cushiony, temperature-controlled bus cruising around the city that day, the view outside, at times, was startling by contrast.

It was the University of Michigan's third annual bus tour of Detroit, aimed at opening the eyes of non-faculty staffers who deal regularly with students from the city. Some of the panoramas were almost completely unfamiliar to those on hand.

"You might see some residents looking out to see

what's going on," said Larry M. Gant, only half joking as listeners piled off the bus to examine a local park near Wayne State University.

A professor of social work and longtime Detroit resident who leads the annual tour on behalf of U-M's mega-umbrella division of student affairs, Gant knows much of the city is foreign terrain to many Ann Arborites.

"Don't be concerned; they're just curious what we're doing," he continued, smiling as he talked into a microphone.

U-M's outreach toward urban Detroit has heightened in

the post-Prop-2 landscape, as any consideration of race in state college admissions is now barred. Gant's Detroit Culture Bus Tour remains one of the university's most robust efforts at improving the sensitivity towards students from Michigan's largest city.

The tour takes place every May, and it lasted all day on May 16 this year.

Free to anyone working in student affairs at U-M, the tour has garnered increasing interest each year and normally fills up well before May;



"I've never been in these corners of the city," said Marsha Benz, above, who works at U-M's health services and participated in the Detroit Culture Bus Tour.

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there's even a waiting list. The aim is to help those who work with students to better serve Detroit students, who make up a large portion of the school's African-American population.

Last Friday, 50 staffers in departments from health services to the Spectrum Center for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender affairs participated.

"The purpose of this tour is clear to everyone who chooses to come on it," Gant said during a stop at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, once an abandoned car dealership. "This is not a sight-seeing tour, it's not ... 'Detroit in 6 hours.'"

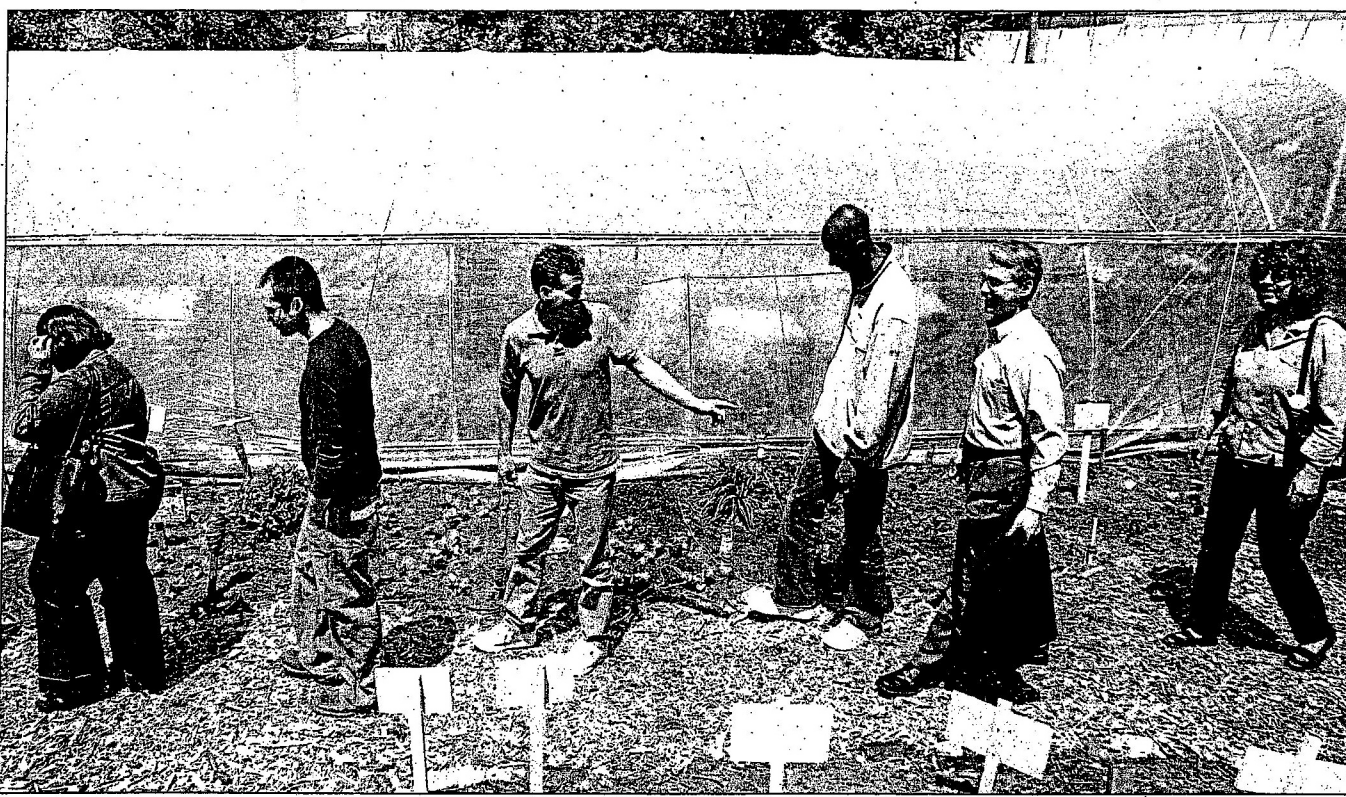
U-M is in the nascent stages of providing a host of efforts targeting students in Detroit — a possible semester of study in Detroit for undergraduates, graduate-student trips and projects with the city, an admissions and outreach office there — under one umbrella.

Gant and others say this humble tour spurs interest among faculty and staff across the university who are excited about heightening awareness of Motown's realities — both positive and negative.

Among the tour's stops were: Public Art Workz, a dynamic, nonprofit art center aimed at youth; Earth Works Garden, an urban gardening project, and Peck Park. The park, Grant said, is part of a larger real estate development that ensures affordable housing for about a fifth of the units.

Included as well were some of Detroit's bigger warts, such as its night-and-day border with Grosse Pointe.

"I'm seeing a much more authentic side of Detroit," said Joe Person, a 24-year-old who



ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press

More than 40 U-M staffers saw some of Detroit's jewels, such as Earth Works Garden. The U-M employees wanted to learn more about Detroit, because it's the home of a majority of the university's African-American population. The tour is popular; there's a waiting list.

lives in Ann Arbor and works as a program assistant for a special student affairs program.

Person said that though he was born and raised in Birmingham, he rarely came to Detroit other than for "touristy-type stuff" such as a trip to the Detroit Institute of Arts or a Tigers game.

"My experience of Detroit has been very partitioned, very in-and-out," he said. "Many people from the suburbs engage Detroit in a very superficial way."

Even in the positive, the tour exposed him to a side of Detroit he'd never seen, he said.

"I'm pleasantly surprised to see what I see," Marsha Benz, 45, said as the day drew to a close. She works in the health promotion and community relations department at Univer-



sity Health Services. "I've never been in these corners of the city."

Maybe no other city than Detroit could better open the eyes of college town folks from a sometimes bubble-like city

such as Ann Arbor, Gant said. "There are these nice jewels in the city that are literally unknown to many," said Gant, who's lived in Detroit for more than 20 years and works with community groups and non-

profits and health education and outreach efforts here. It's not all bad news in the city, of course, but not everybody knows that, he said. "Some neighborhoods are doing well, some are not ... it

Lisa Richter, 28, a farm worker for Earth Works, talks to tour members about growing vegetables in an urban environment.

just depends on where you go," he said.

For Nina Thomas, the trip was a difficult one.

The Belleville resident, who works in the student insurance office, was raised near Peck Park and lived her entire childhood in an urban environment.

"I grew up just a few blocks from here," she said. The schools she went to, the house she grew up in, are all gone though, she said.

She was even brought to tears as the bus drove past some of the more dilapidated neighborhoods.

"I haven't been here in so long," said Thomas. "It was really good to have an opportunity to see the city is coming back."

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