

Children ‘Meet the Heroes’ of black history

By Katie Rice
The Durham VOICE

Eight-year-old Merone Tennant and her mother, Candy, stand in a hall of New Creation United Methodist Church on Clarendon Street in Durham. The two hunch over a map of the upper floor of the church overlaid with images of historic African-American figures, deciding who to visit next.

Tennant has already been to Jackie Robinson’s room, where she learned about his life and triumphs. She has not learn about Robinson or the other figures she plans to meet today in her third-grade classes, she said.

Her mother points out Mae Jemison, the first African-American female astronaut, near a corner of the map.

“You know what she looks like?” Candy asks.

Merone shakes her head.

“You!”

Merone grins before heading down the hall to meet a hero she can relate to.

“Meet the Heroes: An Interactive Black History Event” welcomed 54 visitors on Saturday, Feb. 25 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The event provided children from pre-K to fifth grade the opportunity to meet African-American historical figures and learn about their stories through interactive activities and crafts.

Children could choose from seven figures to meet: Pauli Murray, Jackie Robinson, Mae Jemison, Garrett Morgan, Bessie Coleman, Maya Angelou and Barack Obama. Throughout the day, these figures read books about diversity and teamwork, in addition to manning a room themed to their lives.

Bringing McGill’s vision to fruition

Jermaine McGill, organizer of “Meet the Heroes” and a member of New Creation, was inspired to create the event after teaching his own children about black history in January. His 2- and 4-year-old children were asking him questions about Martin Luther King Jr., and McGill found himself trying to explain King’s legacy to them.

He thought about other figures he admired from black history and wondered how he could make them accessible to children, especially those who, like his own, are still too young to read or attend school. He came up with the idea of cap-



Myra Griffin (right) dresses as Pauli Murray, a civil and women’s rights activist from Durham. As part of “Meet the Heroes,” volunteers dressed up as historical figures from black history and educated children on their characters’ stories. (Photo by Katie Rice)

turing children’s attention through interactive activities and meet and greets.

“In a kid’s eyes, when they see somebody in costume, they don’t necessarily see the person,” McGill said. “They see someone who’s greater than themselves.”

McGill had a little over a month to organize the event. He partnered with his co-workers at Merck, a pharmaceutical company, and members of New Creation to fund and plan it. Thirty-six volunteers helped McGill, including the actors who portrayed the historical figures.

“Once you kind of get a rhythm for what you’re trying to do and you have a clear vision, it makes it easier to execute,” he said.

McGill selected historical figures that would appeal to kids and serve as role models for the next generation. For example, he picked Mae Jemison to showcase a successful woman in STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — to show that girls can succeed in these fields. McGill then cast the figures from his co-workers and church members, and presented them with biographical scripts on their characters.

He advertised the event online and at five schools, three preschools and the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Durham. McGill said he would donate leftover materials from the event to local schools so

kids can continue to learn about marginalized historical figures. He hopes to expand the event in the future.

“I would like this event, whether this year or in future years, to make black history accessible to elementary-aged kids, and by that, I mean it should be exciting, it should be fun, it should be reflective,” McGill said.

The event’s impact on the Durham community

Fran Lynch, lay leader at New Creation, said she volunteered at “Meet the Heroes” because she believes in the project.

“For far too long, our U.S. history as taught in school has been derelict in its duty of teaching the full history of our country,” she said. “So any way that we can enrich that for our young people — and surprisingly, some of our ‘oldsters’ — to learn, it’s to our benefit. It’s to the community’s benefit.”

Lynch understands the importance of teaching children about their history. Her husband is African-American and Native American, and the couple’s children are mixed. When Lynch would go through her children’s textbooks, she noticed a lack of diversity and coverage of people of color.

She has tried her best to educate her children — and now her grandchildren — with the full context of the history of the United States, including the perspectives



Kevin Morgan met and learned about Jackie Robinson at “Meet the Heroes.” He also got to decorate a baseball cap in honor of the famous athlete. (Staff photo by Katie Rice)

of marginalized groups.

“I’m really hopeful that at some point in time, we won’t need a Black History Month, because black history is American history, and it should be in the textbooks in all of its fullness,” Lynch said.

The congregation of New Creation seems to enjoy the opportunity to work together to serve the community through “Meet the Heroes,” Lynch said.

“We are such a mixed congregation, and to have us play a role in presenting something that’s fun and informative to the children and the grandchildren in our congregation is a real plus,” she said.

Hope for the event’s future

James Sanders Jr., a member of New Creation, engaged the children attending the event through his portrayal of Garrett Morgan, inventor of the automated traffic light and safety hood. Sanders is a former history teacher, and he was pleased to step into his old role, albeit in someone else’s shoes.

Sanders punctuated his character’s presentation with sound effects and audience participation, pausing to place a fire helmet and a gas mask over children’s heads one by one. If the expressions on his audience’s faces were any indication, Garrett Morgan was a hit.

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Jermaine McGill, event organizer

“Once you start coming in and putting the pieces together, it just starts rolling,” Sanders said.

Getting children to pay attention to their history and to value diversity is key to America’s future, he said.

“All should show an appreciation for diversity and the contributions made by all who have come to America as immigrants, or in my case, as a descendant of slaves,” he said. “So an event such as this is priceless.”

Sanders said he enjoyed the event this year and looks forward to it continuing.

“I do hope that it will be repeated,” Sanders said. “I hope that the attendance of others will be expanded to show that everyone in the city of Durham will know about ‘Meet the Heroes.’”