

New Creation United Methodist shines light on Black History Month heroes



Brittany View, playing the role of Olympian Wilma Rudolph, explains the instructions for an obstacle course to Merone Tennant, 9. The obstacle course was one of three sports activities in the Olympic Village room. (Staff photo by Will Shropshire)

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On a Saturday afternoon, children skipped up the steps in excitement on their way to the second annual “Meet the Heroes” event at New Creation United Methodist Church. The event celebrated six prominent figures from Black History through interactive activities.

For Albert Shuler, the pastor of New Creation United Methodist Church, the focus on children was particularly important. “Being an African American and remembering those heroes I’ve looked to all my life has a very special meaning for our children, and for them to not have an opportunity such as this would really be remiss.”

This year’s “Meet the Heroes” event honored Matthew Henson, one of the first black explorers to reach the North Pole; Mahalia Jackson, a civil rights activist and so-deemed “Queen of Gospel;” Charles R. Drew, a doctor and blood bank expert; Muhammad Ali, the former American heavyweight champion and a supporter of the civil rights movement; NASA scientist, Katherine Johnson; and track and field Olympian Wilma Rudolph.

“I think it’s an inspiration to hear someone’s story that resembles you and resembles where you come from, and you can find that they’ve overcome and achieved beyond what was expected,” said Jermaine McGill, an administrative council member at New Creation and the creator of the “Meet the Heroes” event. “I just want to see the youth get something out of it to find some inspiration.”

Carolyn Black, a first-time volunteer and former high school guidance counselor, said the interactive event was a great way to learn about Black History. “I can just see the enthusiasm of the volunteers and the participants and those who are coming they’re just excited, and they will be learning by doing, and I just think that’s great,” she said.

In Katherine Johnson’s room, children coded their own ozobots using colored markers and magnetically paint their own galaxies. The children looked at the moving robots in awe, examining the different colored lights as they moved.

In the next room, Mahalia Jackson welcomed the heroes one at a time, introducing their stories and encouraging the children circled around her. “You make sure you stay in school, do really well in school, and then you go for anything in life you

want to go for, don’t let anybody tell you any different,” said Lynette Barber, who portrayed Jackson.

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In Matthew Henson and Charles Drew’s shared room, some children used a virtual reality headset to experience virtual skiing while other participants decorated a compass watch and made blood system slime. As children entered the room, Brandon Willingham, who portrayed Matthew Henson, crouched down to be eye level to the kids and re-told Henson’s heroic story, deepening his voice each time.

In the corner of the room, Willingham encouraged children to put his wisdom to action by fishing from a bucket. In between stories, Willingham was greeted

by hugs from adoring children.

On the other side of the room, Dr. Drew, portrayed by James Sanders, used slime to talk about Dr. Drew's achievements with blood.

Annie Mills, a parent who attended the event, said Dr. Drew's character really appealed to her. "He was talking to my son like he was talking to his own family member about the obstacles that he had to endure as a black man and how when you see the blood bank and that whole system, just knowing that a black man was at the forefront of that was very empowering to my sons," Mills said, standing in the Olympic room.

Wilma Rudolph and Muhammad Ali co-hosted the last room, called the Olympic room. It included an obstacle course and a boxing challenge. For Aaron and Aiden Mills, these were their favorite activities of the day. After trying out the course, children grabbed shaved ice and snacks with their parents before running through the course again.

Among the excitement, learning about Black History was still the most important part of the day. "You can always learn something new, even if you think you've read everything and you know everything, you can always learn something new and this was just the case and point here," said Gail Mills.

Children left the "Meet the Heroes" event with smiles on their faces, some with their hands still clutching their cups of shaved ice. Outside along the railings of the church, Sanders stood with his hands rested neatly in his pockets, still clothed in his white doctor's coat and pants. His red stethoscope dangled from his neck, moving in rhythm with his pacing.

For Sanders, the opportunity to mix historical knowledge and encouragement made his participation in the event worthwhile.

Sanders' love of history started decades before the "Meet The Heroes" event. "I wanted to become a certified public accountant, but once I went down to Central, in the history department, I never strayed." Sanders taught for 33 years on both the high school and collegiate levels.

After spending 45 years away from Durham, he said the event was an opportunity to reconnect with both Durham and his passion for education. "That's why you see a twinkle in my eye, the enthusiasm and the effervescence of being and being able to interact," he said. After Sanders finished speaking, a man passed quickly behind him, saying "He was great, the kids loved him" before returning inside.

For Sanders, understanding the struggle

and contributions of the heroes helped children think about the journeys of their own lives and better understand who they are and who they could be.

Below Sanders, there was a sign tied to the railings. "Meet the Heroes" and "Free to the Public" were in bold letters. A faint breeze moved the red and blue balloons tied to the sign.

As children left the event, they still recognized Sanders as one of their heroes from Black History.

"Bye Dr. Drew!" a child called out to him, walking hand-in-hand with one of his parents. "Bye now," Sanders said, before returning inside to give another group of children a lesson in Black History.