

Teacher helps fourth-graders to take pride in their history

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In my day, the St. Louis Public Schools employed a cadre of teachers who went the extra mile for their students. Some of us came from homes lacking such basic needs as heat, power and steady meals. My teachers tried to fill these gaps, bringing us necessities from their own homes and from their hearts.

Sue Ellen Turner reminds me of those generous teachers. She teaches fourth-graders at Jefferson Elementary School in the Carr Square neighborhood. It's a school where 92 percent of the students qualify for the free- and reduced-price lunch program and a significant number are homeless or "displaced," coming from local shelters.

Turner invited me to watch her class rehearse a play they will perform next week. Jefferson's audience will experience a celebration of African-American heritage in dance, song and movement. Most, however, won't be privy to the passion behind the production or the efforts of a teacher trying to connect a troubled generation with their hidden potential.

Turner has taught at Jefferson for more than 20 years, but has participated in programs with districts that are more racially and economically diverse. She marvels at ethnic groups that absorb their histories and urge their children to carry on cultural traditions.

Such pride is not universally shared among blacks, Turner said. The limited amount of black history found in today's elementary school books is no match for the negative images of blacks found in the media or in poor neighborhoods.

Turner described how she has taught children who are ashamed of their history and their race. She recalled a parent's harsh rebuke after she found out that Turner told the class their culture stems from Africa.

"My children are not from Africa. They're from St. Louis," the parent said.

Recalling the moment, Turner said, "Most of our children don't know anything about themselves. Oh, they know a little about slavery and a bit about Dr. King. But it's paramount that they know we come from greatness. They need to know that they, too, can be productive parts of society."

Late last year, Turner met with members of Interchange, an arts collaborative working with cultural organizations and the public school system. The group uses music, art and theater to help students better connect with language, math, history and other disciplines.

The group put her in touch with Diane Davenport and Laurie Melnick, artists in residence with Metro Theatre Company.

Turner, Davenport and Melnick engaged the students in a group discussion to find out what they knew about their history. They were pleased when the kids expressed a desire to learn more about black notables and events of the civil rights era.

To connect the present with the past, Davenport shared with the kids a photo she had taken of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"They couldn't get over the fact that I was alive at that time," chuckled Davenport, who has taught music for 43 years.

The rehearsal I attended was a preview of the collaborative effort among Turner, the artists and the fourth-graders.

Mock thunder filled the darkened room as children grimaced, grunted and pulled large black bands to demonstrate anger and anguish. Kids, wearing the white gloves of oppression, stood menacingly atop chairs as students shrieked, ducked and dodged to avoid their grasps. When lights brightened, the children gathered in a circle, listening as the "grandmas" explained their tribulations and triumphs.

"We discussed the importance of older people in our lives and how we need to keep sharing our stories," Davenport explained.

The children brought black icons to life: Harriet Tubman, Langston Hughes and King. Turner snapped pictures and danced as the kids intertwined interpretive dance with the painful and powerful music of slavery and the civil rights eras:

"Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around ... I'm gonna keep on walkin', keep on talkin' — marching on to freedom land."

The play is her way of trying to serve a bigger need, Turner said, pointing to a stack of magazines — Newsweek, National Geographic, Ebony and Jet. "I want them to know there's another world outside their neighborhood," Turner said. "Mostly, I want them to know who they are so we can obtain our rightful place in society."

Toward the end of the play, white gloves no longer dominate the scene. They're mixed with gloves of different colors and tossed in a pile — each representing the children's past or present "heroes."

Hopefully, the closing song will help the students remember a generous teacher's mission: "It's our journey. We're on our way. We must live this journey each and every day."