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African-American History Celebration Brings Campus Together

Weeks before Melrose Leadership Academy's African-American History Celebration on March 25, it was clear the event would be special. MLA Family Liaison Hilda Bucio, who helped organize the celebration, recalls that even typically less motivated students were eager to take part, practicing and preparing every day in the run-up to the event. "We saw our students feeling very positive and proud to be participating and performing," says Bucio.

The inspiration for the celebration came from Geraldine Price and Karen Booker, key members of the school's new African-American parent group. They and fellow organizers centered the event around a showcase of student performances from MLA's Community Bridges after-school program. (See page 2 for more on Community Bridges.) Students read letters to President Barack Obama (recently featured on National Public Radio), sang songs, and performed Afro-Cuban, Afro-Columbian, step, and salsa dances.

8th-grader Jasmine sang two songs during the celebration, one with teacher Chanadoll Garrett, and the other solo. "[Performing] made me more confident in my singing because I got to experience how it feels to sing in front of a whole bunch of people," reflects Jasmine. "I felt confident doing the solo, and everybody [in the crowd] was hecka loud, like 'Yay!'"

"We wanted to celebrate the history and also the influence, around the world, that African-Americans have had," says Bucio. Beats & Flows teacher Yusuf Ahmad created a video of historic moments in African-American history, and Garrett taped interviews with several African-American students in the days before the event, then showed the clips during the celebration. "[The kids talked about] what traditions they practice at home with their family, and about what has been a challenge for them as African-Americans. Once we all watched the clips, we were able to see we have so many similarities," says Bucio. "It's just a matter of getting to actually know people."

"We were very pleased with the turnout. The cafeteria was full!" Bucio says. "We had most of our African-American parents and families present, and our Latino families as well. The parents were very excited and happy after the event, and said they felt right at home."

6th-grader Cohen, MC for the event, says, "I enjoyed my time even though I did have some stage fright! I would like to see this event happen every year." Jasmine echoes the sentiment. She thinks it's important to host heritage events like this "to know about the history and what people have been through, and so that we can all be recognized."



Extended Day Expands Horizons

"From samba to percussion to capoeira, what they're exposed to is awesome," says Armando Garcia about Melrose Leadership Academy's Community Bridges Extended Day Program. Every one of MLA's 200 students participates, choosing from an array of enrichment and academic electives, including girls' and boys' leadership, mixed media art, gardening, soccer, homework help, and hip-hop dance. "They have so many opportunities to learn about different cultures, traditions, and skills," says Garcia, the program's coordinator. "Even though it's a long day, they do really well staying engaged."

"Classes like Beats & Flows give them the chance to excel in something just as academic as a regular class, but in a different way: by putting together a rhyme and making a beat," says Garcia. He's also seen inspiring outcomes in the Community Bridges' dance classes.

"This class helps me learn how to do things I'll do when I'm an adult, like cooking and gardening, and I can share this with my family and they can benefit from it."

"Some girls have issues in [daytime] classes, but come into dance class and are completely focused." Families see the benefits of the program, too.

"Parents are happy to know their kids are in a safe place, learning something positive," says Garcia.

But as always, the most compelling testimonials come from the kids themselves. "I like Beats & Flows because it helps me let out all the energy I have, and I think that I'm a good poet," says 6th-grader Kenry. "I'm really good at [rapping], and I have a lot of talent.

I just finished my fifth song last week, so I think I'm doing really well." Titles of his songs include "Obama," "You Know," and "Soft As a Feather" – "it's about liking a girl."

"'Obama,' I made that song the day after he was announced President," reflects Kenry. "It's basically about how I think Obama will change our America." He's become keenly aware of the connection between rap and

poetry: "Poetry mixes in with making music," he explains. "When I learned more about what rap music is, it helped me in my Humanities class where we do poetry. So it helps me in both [extended and regular day]." Previously, his favorite poets were all rappers, but he's coming around to others. "Maya Angelou has some nice poetry," he says.



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8th-grader Trevor has found a niche in Gehry Oatey's Cooking and Gardening class. "The teacher is really nice and fun to work with, and I just like that subject because it's very hands-on," he says. "This class helps me learn how to do things I'll do when I'm an adult, like cooking and gardening, and I can share this with my family and they can benefit from it."

6th-grader Michael's favorite Extended Day classes are athletics. "I just like exercising and always being active," he says. "Sometimes we run at the track at [nearby] Mills College. [Extended Day] is important because, for one, it keeps us off the streets here in Oakland. Two, you're well-rounded, getting homework help, computer skills, and physical education. I think all after-school programs should have that kind of choice."

Kenry agrees. "I want to say that I think our Community Bridges classes help us become well-rounded people and will make us good adults."

