'A MODEL FOR OTHERS': BLACK HISTORY MONTH AT PINE VALLEY

Story and Photos by Christina Beam
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Third grader Camille fully embodied Rosa Parks at the Black History Month wax museum at Pine Valley Elementary Friday.

She wore a little vintage plaid shirt with a round collar, a little blazer, a little black hat, transforming into a live-action miniature version of the Civil Rights icon in her infamous mug shot.

Her hands clasped in determination, her face stoic, Camille stood still — like a wax sculpture — until someone came to hear her story.

Then she began: “Each person must live their life as a model for others...”

For 11 years teacher Tim Mills has led the event with his third grade team.

It’s a comprehensive academic exercise, he said — students pick their Black history hero and then read and research about them, write a speech, draw and create a display board, practice public speaking.

But in a community and school district with a fraught history of race relations, it’s also an event where students share in the beauty and contributions of Black culture, and where they’re unified in celebrating and uplifting the past.

“It’s hard if you don’t see yourself in history,” Mr. Mills said.

“When students see people that look like themselves contributing to the world and our country, it empowers them to realize they can do that, too.”
Camille, in between reciting her speech for proud parents and curious classmates, shares that she chose to be Rosa Parks because “she’s very brave and she’s very determined, and she did a lot for the world.”

*How will she be like Rosa Parks in real life?*

“If something’s not right,” she answers without hesitation, “I will help fix it no matter what.”

Every third grader participated, said teacher Elisabeth Mead, “even if they don’t ever speak.”

Jeremy, a new language learner who Ms. Mead said never talks in class, found his voice as Roberto Clemente.

In a baseball hat and a big toothy grin, he confidently recited for School Board member Stephanie Kraybill:

> “Hello, my name is Roberto Clemente. I am a famous baseball player. Star right fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates, MVP 1966.”

His mom, new to this nation, stood nearby, hands on her cheeks in a mix of wonder and pride, eyes tearing up.

“This event meant everything to Jeremy,” Ms. Mead said. “He spent weeks practicing his speech and practicing in front of others to build his confidence. His whole family came out this morning!”

When you spend time with elementary students in a diverse classroom, you realize that the differences we ascribe to one another don’t apply there.

Every third grader at Pine Valley was channeling and immersing themselves in a character from Black history, feeling pride in sharing that story, identifying as that person for a day.

Knowing, as student Charlie as chef Edna Regina Lewis conveyed, that Black history is all of our history.

“I learned that they did a lot of things to help us and that we should respect them,” she said, “because maybe our society wouldn't have been the same if George Washington Carver hadn't made his contributions.”
James Ramon, who stayed the whole time to watch his son Jayden act as Michael Jordan, said together they had researched not just the icon’s basketball career but his philanthropy and community involvement.

As a Black parent, the event meant so much to him. Part of growing forward together is reconciling the past together.

“It’s important for the country to know the full picture, not just half the picture. To know everybody’s history, not just things written from one perspective,” he said.

“Because if we can learn from the past, maybe we can forge a better future, not just for ourselves, but for future generations.”