

Music highlights Black History Month celebration

At Boyd's Chapel

BY GAYLE PAGE
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Almost always, the creative dedicated minority has made the world better.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

Music filled the air at Boyd's Chapel United Methodist Church in Jefferson City on Sunday as the large congregation sang 'Lift Every Voice and Sing.' The song, written by James Weldon Johnson, an early civil rights activist, is often referred to as the African American National Anthem. It was an appropriate opening for the 2011 Black History Month celebration.

Following scripture reading and prayer, the singing continued with the Heavenly Warriors, a Hamblen County gospel quintet made up of lead singer Melvin Johnson, second lead Robert Leeper, baritone Pierce Garrett and tenor Todd Swagerty. This singing troupe is accompanied by banjo player William Mason, who led another group singing of 'Come By Here, My Lord' (kumbayah).

Mason proudly informed the crowd that the instrument he played was not invented in Nashville, as might be commonly be-

lieved, but was actually created in Africa. Simpler forms of the instrument were later created by enslaved Africans in Colonial America, adapted from several African instruments of the same basic design.

Leeper spoke about the freedom riders and marchers during the Civil Rights movement of the sixties. "God touched the hearts of other races to help us in those times," said Leeper, admitting that marching and riding in the buses could be a frightening experience for black people, so to relieve their fears they sang old spirituals and the singing gave them the courage needed to meet the challenges. One of the songs was 'Staying On Freedom,' and Leeper led the Boyd's Chapel gathering in singing that old hymn about liberty.

Next to entertain was a young women's interpretive dance team called 'Genesis.' The ladies were dressed all in black except for white gloves, which made their synchronized performances both dramatic and graceful. Truelette Moore and Lorrie Goins are the dance team trainers.

Since this historical celebration was closely related to the people who had at one time or another attended Nelson Merry School in Jefferson City, a few words of remembrance were spoken.

"I remember black students being bussed from the far corners of



Black History celebration

Dressed in traditional African regalia to celebrate Black History Month, and posing by a storyboard of Nelson Merry memories put together by Julia Taliaferro, are Joan Simon Hendricks (left) and Claudia Haskins. (Staff photo - Gayle Page)

the county to get here," mentioned one person. Before desegregation, Nelson Merry was the only black school in this sizeable county. Another said it was touching to look back at "where we came from to where we are now."

Joan Hendricks told the congregation she remembered the

raggedy textbooks students at Nelson Merry were required to learn from. "Getting new books was like getting a toy for Christmas," she said.

Then someone pointed out that there are only two Nelson Merry teachers still living, and one of them was in attendance.

Raleigh Weems, Sr., stood to a heartfelt round of applause. The other teacher, Carl Lawson, lives out of state and wasn't able to be there. Memories of those school days surrounded the crowded sanctuary in story-boards, photo collages, newspaper clippings and other memorabilia. Mrs. Julia

Taliaferro served as the church's official decorations committee.

The program's guest speaker was Reverend Charles (Bo) Simpson from Thornhill Baptist Church in Grainger County. Preacher Simpson grew up in Jefferson County and he, too, attended Nelson Merry School.

The homily he delivered drew parallels between Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life and leadership, and Joseph, the son of Jacob in the Old Testament, who also had a dream and whose brothers sold him into slavery. He later became a great leader of the land in Pharaoh's Egypt. Of course, Martin Luther King did not live long enough to comprehend his own greatness, being only 39 when he was assassinated.

Black History Month promotes awareness of African-American history. Negro History Week, which commenced in 1926, later expanded, and in 1976, its title was changed to Black History Month. A major focus of Black History Month is educating all Americans about African-American cultural backgrounds and achievements, and reminding them of the arduous struggles that have been endured. Perhaps most of all, it is a celebration of the rich history and traditions, and of the invaluable contributions by African-Americans which give them reasons to take pride in their race.