

Newtown program is tribute to youth

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CORRESPONDENT PHOTO / ERICA NEWPORT

Standing from left: Glenda Williams; Dr. Cheryl Smith; Allyiah Bartley; Gabrielle Holt; Michael Suarez; Jonathan Buckley; Anthony Freeman; and sitting: mistress of ceremony Zayna Robinson, all helped the community celebrate Black History Month at North Sarasota Library.

With a focus on youth, the third annual Black History Month exhibition showcased young people's accomplishments in the Newtown community through compelling narratives and performances.

The "Newtown Youth Past and Present" on Feb. 16 was hosted by the Friends of North Sarasota Library at the library.

Lovette Harper, Friends board member emeritus, said the pieces exhibited are from students ranging in age from prekindergarten to college and recent college graduates.

"We are showcasing our treasures, our future and our present," Harper said. "A special collection, that's what they are."

Harper explained to the group that the event's panel members, mistress of ceremony and performers were all youths, and they are known for their community leadership, academic achievements, community service, spirituality and extraordinary talents.

On the program, the words of African-American historian Carter G. Woodson set the tone for the event: "In the long run, there is not much discrimination against superior talent."

Youth panelists were Zayna Robinson, mistress of ceremonies and Precious Pearls; Gabrielle Holt, Embracing Our Differences; Indigo Alexis, Greatness Beyond Measures; Allyiah Bartley, Roy McBean Boys & Girls Clubs; and Jonathan Buckley, Business and Professional Women.

Michael Suarez, newly retired from a post as executive director of Sarasota's emergency services, and Friends board member Glenda Williams also joined the panel discussion as lifelong community residents who have witnessed history in Newtown.

The panel discussion of sharing was led by Newtown native Ed James III, an Association for the Study of African American Life and History scholarship recipient and recent graduate of the University of Chicago.

James told the group that his grandmother was in the first graduating class at Booker High School in 1937 and that he is a product of the Sarasota County public school system.

"We are blessed," said Cheryl Smith, the president of the Friends group, in describing local youth to a packed room at the celebration.

Following the event, Smith said Friends of North Sarasota Library had great success in the past looking at black history specifically in Newtown.

The cultural exhibition starts in the entrance and continues throughout the library.

"This year, we wanted to emphasize what's happening now with youth in the past and youth in the present," she said. "We wanted to highlight and showcase good things they are doing. There are too many things that are happening in Newtown that are reported as negative, and we wanted to broaden that and make sure the children who have been doing good things for a long time were showcased."

Smith pointed out Gabrielle Holt, a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha's Precious Pearls enrichment program and a longtime volunteer for the library's bookstore.

Gabrielle, a junior at Riverview High School, talked to the group about her role as an officer for a coexistence club at her school, Embracing Our Differences, where she heralds the call for embracing diversity.

"I really love Sarasota County and how we are all connected," Gabrielle said, recognizing friends she has met in community leadership projects who joined her on the panel.

After college, Suarez said, he returned to the place he described as a village, a close-knit community when he grew up in the 1960s and '70s. He challenged people to reach out and change the life of a youth, like the community once did. Suarez also talked about his own experiences in volunteer work with youth over the years.

"We have so much to offer to these young people, but we aren't doing it," he said. "If you can do something to help a young person, you should."

Smith said the Friends members were grateful to have local talent performing at the event. Among them was Greatness Beyond Measures singing spiritual work songs from their ancestors.

"We were also very pleased to have schools come and perform for us," Smith said. "It really highlights the good things they are all doing. We had Emma E. Booker choir and Booker Middle jazz band."

She urged people to return to the library and explore the Black History Month exhibition, which will be up through March.

"We encourage all of the community of Sarasota, as a whole, to come see the exhibition," Smith said. "Come out and study, look at their faces. Pay attention to the wonderful kids we have in Newtown."