

Features

Black history 'everpresent' in diocesan schools

Programs offer positive images for students

By Richard A. Kiley

When educational consultant Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu came to Blessed Sacrament School in Rochester last March to offer a workshop for teachers and administrators from urban Catholic schools, he said that "if you're going to sell black children on being a black engineer, then you've got to show them a black engineer."

Corpus Christi School on Main Street in Rochester has been doing that.

Kunjufu, a representative of the Chicago-based African-American Images also said that the American educational system has failed many black students by not recognizing or accommodating their needs and cultural differences.

St. Monica's School is changing that.

Like all of the Catholic grammar schools in the diocese, Corpus Christi and St. Monica's are celebrating February as Black History Month, but the effort to promote black culture and history is something administrators and teachers at both schools successfully integrate in their curricula all year long.

According to Sister Eileen Daly, principal of Corpus Christi School, parents and teachers show that setting educational goals offers the potential for success and that the school is simply "responding to the community we deal with."

"(A multicultural emphasis) is an ever-present thing here; this is a majority-minority school," Sister Daly said. "We're a microcosm of society; you're not just going to deal with

your own culture growing up."

One of the school's prime concerns is what students want to be when they do grow up. By working with the Urban League of Rochester and Project Business, the school schedules visits from local black professionals to provide role models whom black children can look up to and respect.

"One of our main strengths is pushing the kids' self-esteem," said Sister Daly, who said the school has been visited by black professionals ranging from bankers to Xerox managers.

"The kids see a lot of different careers and they learn that you are who you make yourself."

Teaching students at Corpus Christi that they don't have to conform to society's stereotypes is another concern of the school's administration, Sister Daly said.

"We try and stress that they don't have to fit into stereotypes . . . the 'Joe cool' image some of them see isn't a positive one," Sister Daly remarked.

Presenting positive images is also something St. Monica's School principal Gaynelle Wethers knows a lot about.

Wethers' office at the Genesee Street school is decorated with numerous illustrations depicting Jesus, the Blessed Mother and certain saints as people of color.

In fact, many of the walls throughout the inner-city school are covered with pictures showing black bishops and apostles.

"You can't ask students to emulate Jesus if Jesus is not the same color as they are," said Wethers, who has been the principal at St. Monica's for the past four years.

Wethers said that it is important that schools use curricula reflecting views other than those of the dominant white, European culture.

"Everybody's viewpoint is presented here, so students can make the choice of what they want to believe," Wethers said.



First-grader Gloria Elzey entered this drawing in St. Monica's competition for Black History Month.

Susan Ryan, a teacher at St. Monica's School, said she is showing her students that "ability plus effort will equal success."

One of the means school administrators used this year to point out the successes of blacks throughout history was an art and essay contest, in which students tried to convey their feelings about their black heritage.

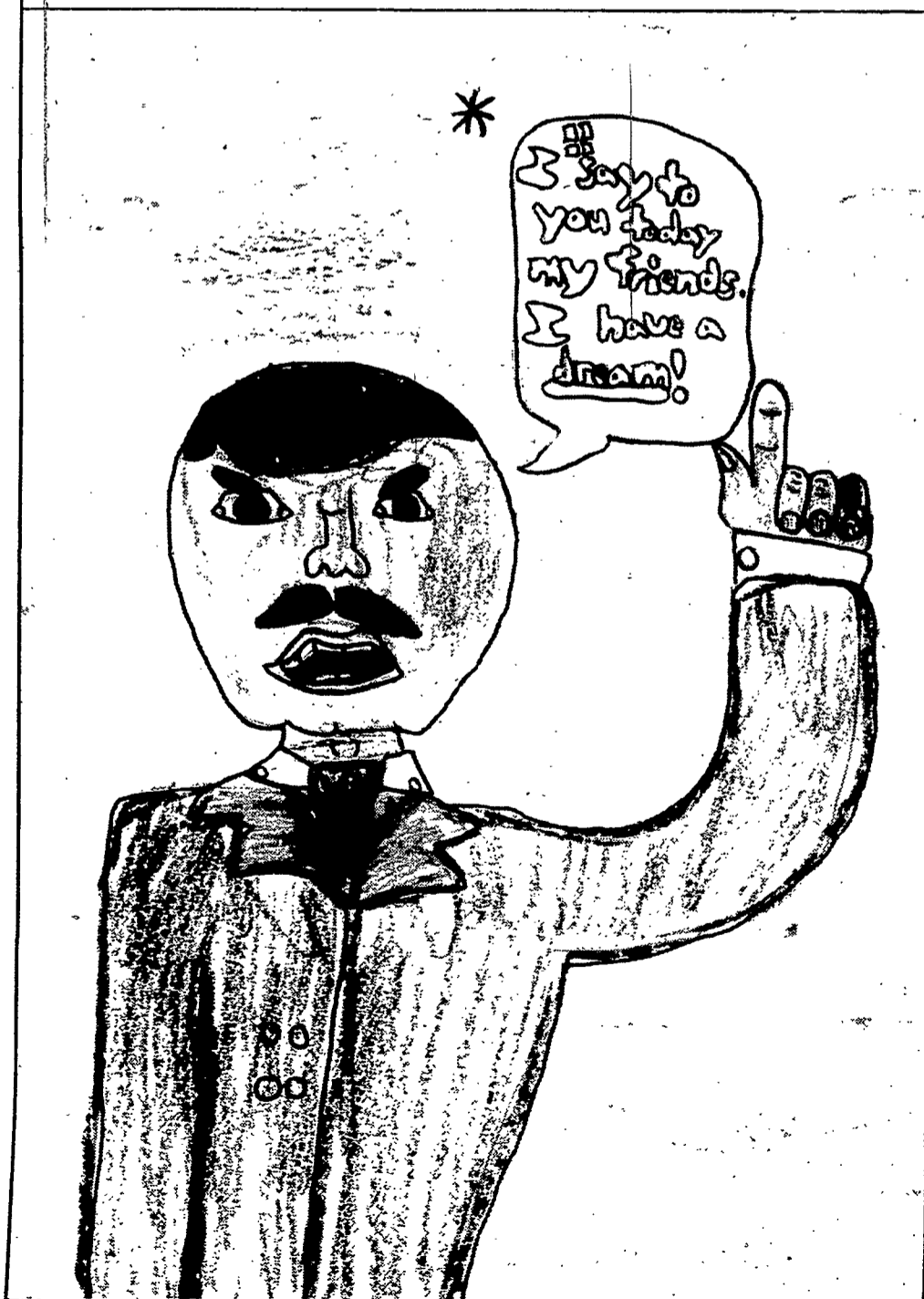
"We're trying to motivate the students by really getting them to think and work hard," said Ryan, who taught at St. Augustine's until

the urban Catholic school closed.

Ryan said that Black History Month creates a focus for students so they can understand the importance of black contributions to today's world.

"(Black History Month) is more of a climax of things they've learned since September," Ryan said. "All the images they have are right there for them so they can identify with black people. Most of them have a good sense of black heritage."

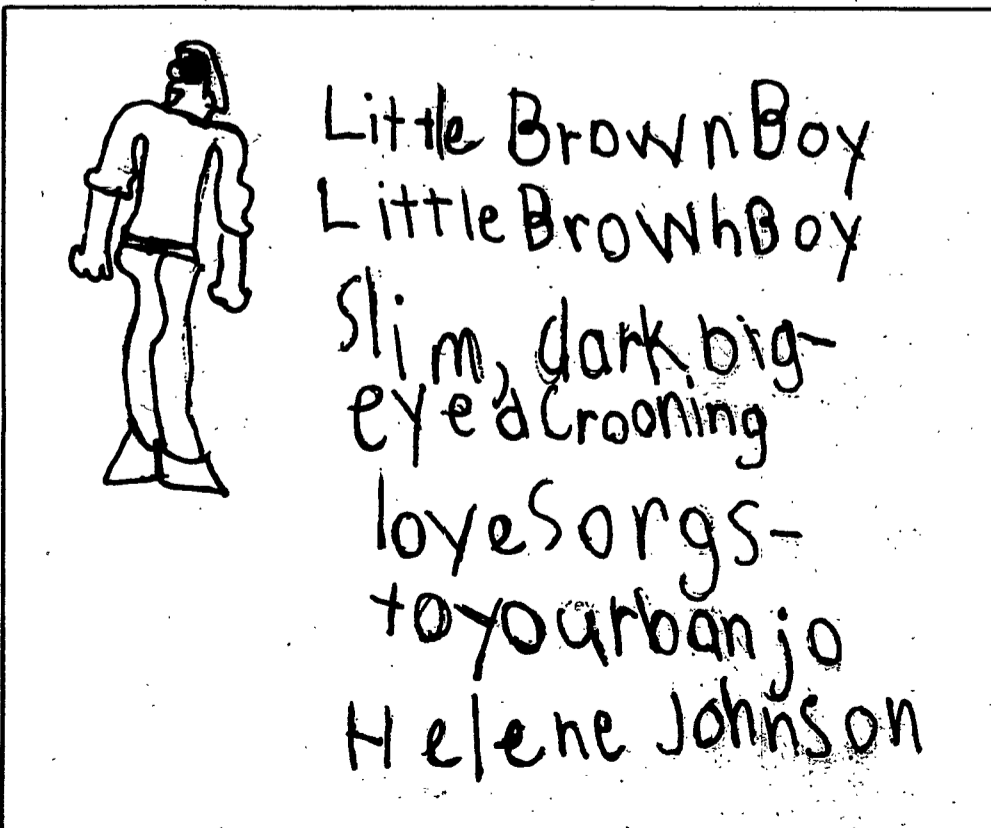
Keep the dream alive!



This poster of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. won first place.



Jose Miranda, a seventh-grader at St. Monica elementary school won first place in the art category for his illustration of the Langston Hughes poem "Dream Variation."



Second-grader Derrick Jones won first place in the art category for his illustration of the poem "Little Brown Boy" by Helene Johnson.

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