

Eastway students learn about black history through music

A talented music teacher guides students through elementary years

by Zakiya Scott

Staff Writer

"Who was the first African American to win the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament?" asked Star Sampson, principal of Eastway Elementary, to each student via classroom speakers. This question of the day reflected a current focus at the school: Black History Month.

As the daily morning routine came to an end in each classroom, Mike Truzy was busy with a Monday routine of his own. He was arranging and tuning instruments like the glockenspiel in preparation for his first lesson.

It was 8:30 a.m., and while some students were returning from their weekend to begin a science lesson, third graders in Truzy's music class eagerly took their seats on the carpet to begin their weekly lesson on the blues. This month, students in each grade level are learning about prominent eras of black music history.

Instead of designated desks and printed worksheets, Truzy's room has open space to dance and is decorated by rows of xylophones and a handful of colorful African drums like the tubano and the congo.

In Truzy's class, "students can learn art, history and science through music," he said.

Truzy was recently announced the 2010-2011 Teacher of the Year for the Durham Public School System. While Truzy teaches students classical music throughout the school year, he dedicates Black History Month to the blues, jazz, spirituals, hip-hop and Motown.

At the beginning of class, the students gather around the computer screen to watch a clip from the Cosby Show – a performance by BB King with his famous guitar, Lucille. Truzy uses this opportunity to teach the students about the history and heritage of blues



Staff photo by Zakiya Scott

Student art lines the halls of Eastway Elementary's front entrance in celebration of Black History Month. This poster, "Dreaming Great Things," is one of many examples of the student art displayed in February.

music and terms related to the genre.

Students are taught accuracy in melodies through synchronized snaps and corresponding body motions as they sing, "High E then go all the way down." Once they have taken to their designated instruments and practiced individually, students replay a high-spirited tune in unison. Almost suddenly, beats are nearly perfected and a miniature blues band is created in the halls of Eastway.

"If we don't teach it, the students will never know," Truzy said on the importance of teaching the history of music at such a young age.

At Eastway, kindergarteners and first-graders learn about the legacy of Berry Gordy and Motown as hits like Marvin Gaye's "How Sweet It Is" play in the background. Students warm up by dancing as artists of the era would: side scoops, shoulder bounces and claps to the beat. They even pass around old CDs by the Supremes and the Jackson Five to learn about the different clothing and hairstyles.

The following year, these same students will progress to the next level in

their music education with a focus on jazz, the genre designated to second-graders. They will listen, dance and sing classic jazz songs, such as those by Duke Ellington, as Truzy plays the piano.

Before school lets out, Truzy traces the history of spirituals with fourth-graders. The class breaks down the meaning of codes and listens to songs like "Wade in the Wader." Truzy says the lesson began when one of his students corrected him on his spelling of "wader" instead of "water."

"But this was the way the slaves spelled it, those that could read and write. A runaway slave's hiding spot would often be in the water," explained Truzy that day.

In his fifth grade class, Truzy taught the origins of 1990s hip-hop and was even challenged to a breakdancing competition.

A technique that runs through each grade level's lesson plan is the incorporation of hands-on learning in each and every period. Through instruments, Truzy keeps students active and engaged through each month of the school year.