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One-man show turns bitter pill of racism's past into history lesson Local civil rights pioneer to speak after program

by Leslie Boyd, STAFF WRITER published January 27, 2006 6:00 am

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ASHEVILLE — Rosa Davis will return to the spot Tuesday evening where she was denied entry to a movie theater with her children in 1961.

This time, though, she will be an honored guest.

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Davis, an adviser to ASCORE, the Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, will speak after a one-man show, "Brown vs. The Board of Education: Fifty Years Later," cosponsored by the Diana Wortham Theatre and the Center for Diversity Education.

As an ASCORE adviser, Davis went to what was then the Plaza Theater and was refused admission and threatened with jail. The Diana Wortham Theatre stands today where the Plaza was in 1961.

Davis graduated from Stephens-Lee High School, the city's school for

African-Americans, in 1955. She wanted to go to college, but the two business colleges and the Asheville-Biltmore College didn't accept African-Americans. Warren Wilson College did accept her, but she couldn't go because she didn't have transportation.

"I actually had an interview at Blanton (business school), but they told me they couldn't accept me because there was another business college in town and they would lose all their white students," Davis said.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision known as Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kan., which would force schools to integrate, was decided in 1954. But it would be another 10 to 12 years before most school systems were integrated and many whites stubbornly and bitterly fought the process.

In the play, actor Michael Wiley plays several characters, including plaintiff Oliver Brown, attorney Thurgood Marshall, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren and a teenage girl. The show is written as an educational piece, Wiley says, but it also is intended to be fun.

"I inject humor into it because I want people to walk away with both the medicine and the candy," says Wiley, who is based in Apex. "I run across so many young black kids who go, 'I don't want to hear that part of history because it's so sad.' It makes them angry to hear how people were treated."

Rae Geoffrey, director of outreach and education for the Diana Wortham Theatre, has known Wiley since they were at Catawba College together.

"I've seen his work and I knew it would be a good fit for schoolchildren here," Geoffrey said. "It's a great opportunity for parents and teenagers to make an evening of it."

Wiley also performs plays about baseball great Jackie Robinson and Henry "Box" Brown, a slave who packaged himself into a box and was shipped to freedom.

"I don't want my shows to ignite anger; it should inspire dialogue," he says. "It should spark a desire to learn more."

The play will be performed Tuesday morning for several hundred students. The public performance will take place at 7 p.m., followed by Davis' talk.

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credit: Courtesy UNC Asheville Ramsey Library

Before the Supreme Court decision known as Brown v. the Board of Education, schools in Asheville and across the country were segregated. Here, the safety patrol from Mountain Street School poses with Asheville's first African-American police officer, Gilbert Sligh, in 1946.

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Want to go?

- What: Brown vs. Board of Education: Fifty Years Later When: 7 p.m. Tuesday Where: Diana Wortham Theatre at Pack Place Ticket Prices: Regular, \$12; senior, \$10; student, \$10; child, \$8 Info/Tickets: Call the box office at 257-4530 or visit www.dwtheatre.com Artist Web site: www.mikewileyproductions.com Exhibit: "With All Deliberate Speed: School Desegregation in Buncombe County," is the focus of a free pre-show reception beginning at 6 p.m. Tuesday. The exhibit is also open following the performance. The exhibit features the history of integration from 1955 to 2000 of Asheville City Schools, Buncombe County Schools, UNCA and Warren Wilson College.

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