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One-man drama teaches high school students about segregation

By Charity Cline Mangan
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CONCORD - High school students were given an opportunity to learn about segregation through performing arts.

African-American actor Michael Wiley performed his one-man drama Brown v. the Board of Education for students in Cabarrus County.

He recounted the court case, the decision and its consequences in his performance, where he transforms himself into multiple characters.

The performance went back to the 1954 case, when the United States Supreme Court ruled that it was a violation of the constitution to separate children in public school because of their race.

At one of Fridays performance's at Central Cabarrus High School, Wiley used only a shawl, a chair, a handkerchief, a pair of glasses and a hat to transform himself into more than 10 different characters - from a Supreme Court justice to a 14-year-old cheerleader.

The main character was the case's namesake Oliver Brown of Topeka, Kansas, whose third-grade daughter Linda wanted to attend the nearest school, which happened to be a white school, and was denied acceptance.

It was then that he joined with others in a suit against the Board of Education for the landmark 1954 decision.

"I'm a railroad welder by profession, but now it seems that I weld together the people of the world," Wiley, as Oliver Brown, told the crowd.

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Wiley played out some of the most important court scenes for the students, who had been studying some of the case in their history classes in preparation for the performance.

Students and staff joined Wiley on stage to stand in for some of the characters. Students especially loved it when Wiley called up on stage Assistant Principal Todd Smith to act as a young black student, asked to sit in the hall rather than in class with his white classmates. When Smith came back on stage and left the chair behind the curtain, Wiley said to him, "Why don't you bring the chair back, brother."

"That play was awesome," said J.J. Perkey, a junior. "It was hilarious."

Throughout the story, Wiley makes clear that the ruling by the courts on segregation didn't change the tense situation between whites and blacks overnight. It took many years to do that.

"Integration was supposed to help us, but it hurt us at first," said Wiley playing a school basketball coach recounting the decision many years later. "Black leaders were demoted, white coaches refused to pick black students for their teams, and black students were rejected from white schools and put through a rigorous process just to get in."

Senior Mason Quick, an African-American student, said the court case, which he knew only a little about before, was an eye-opener.

"It was really educational," Quick said. "And it was a good decision to desegregate schools, because otherwise I wouldn't be here today, being part of this."

Other students expressed their thoughts on the Supreme Court decision.

Kayley Strumb, a junior, compared what happened then to what is happening now in Iraq.

"There could have been another war (without the 1954 ruling)," she said. "Like us and Iraq now, it could have been us against African Americans, which is just us against ourselves."

Ending his show, Wiley sent the message that all these years later, racism hasn't just disappeared today against black people or other minorities.

"It's time to eliminate prejudices against us all," Wiley, as Oliver Brown, said. "The last name could just as easily have been Hernandez or King."

The performance, sponsored by the Cabarrus Arts Council, ended with Wiley singing "Walk Hand in Hand," and joining together audience members to stand with him in front of the state, holding hands.

Sophomore Kayla Wynn explained what the show meant to her.

"It was good that Oliver Brown and those other people had the courage to stand up and fight," Wynn said. "And now it's good that black and white students are together. We all bleed red."

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