



SOMERVILLE MIDDLE SCHOOL PAYS TRIBUTE TO PAUL ROBESON

Voice of the People

A special assembly took place at Somerville Middle School last week when community organizers, educators, a local historian and six eighth grade students came together to tell the story of Paul Robeson, one of Somerville's most famous and accomplished sons. The special assembly for sixth, seventh and eighth grade students was organized by Evelyn Field and Peppy Margolis of the Paul Robeson Institute at Raritan Valley Community College with the assistance and support of Georgette Boulegeris, Principal of Somerville Middle School and community organizer Sharleen Leahey.

The event began with a film showing of an excerpt from the documentary "Paul Robeson: Singer, Scholar, Athlete" by Giles R. Wright. A talk by local historian Randall Westbrook examined Robeson's most formative years spent in Somerville. Robeson's legendary career as a singer on the concert stage and as an actor in the theater and on the screen was preceded by his years as a student in Somerville High School where he excelled in sports, drama, singing, academics and debating. In her welcome address to the assembled students and guests Ms. Boulegeris emphasized the relevance that Robeson's extraordinary achievements have to the challenges and obstacles facing students today. Despite violence and racism from teammates at Rutgers, which he attended after winning a scholarship, Robeson won 15 varsity letters in sports (baseball, basketball, track) and was twice named to the All-American Football Team. He showed us all, by example, the importance of self-esteem, discipline by not only setting high standards of achievement for himself but also expecting more from others.

A musical performance by vocalist Khy Garner, who performed Robeson's trademark song "Old Man River" and "The House I Live In," provided an inspiring crescendo to the program. As Mr. Garner's deep baritone voice filled the cavernous auditorium, it seemed as if the entire audience was holding its collective breath. Listening to the operatic strains of "Old Man River" from that stage on that beautiful almost-Spring March morning transported the students to another time, a little over one hundred years ago, when a young Somerville high school student named Paul Robeson studied, played, learned, and achieved greatness.

The assembly came to a moving conclusion when six eighth grade students from Somerville Middle School stepped onstage to read the six principles of Paul Robeson's 'Credo.' One memorable passage serves to remind us that throughout his many years of fame and professional success, Paul Robeson never wavered in his defiance in the face of oppression and his commitment to the upliftment of humanity. He wrote:

"Success without helping those who have fallen behind, is worthless."

—Sharleen Leahey
March 18, 2011



(left to right): Sharleen Leahey, James Lubrano, Peppy Margolis, Khy Garner, Jadusingh Martin, Randall Westbrook, Evelyn Field, Principal Georgette Boulegeris, and Superintendent of Schools Dr. Timothy J. Purnell

Photo by Carol Levasseur



Vocalist Khy Garner

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Sharleen Leahey is a songwriter, performer and founder of songs4peace, an arts education organization currently based in Central New Jersey. She can be reached at songs4peace@earthlink.net.