

Written by Titilayo Bediako
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WE WIN Institute's commitment to excellence lead students to study the lives of four incredible African American women who exhibit excellence and are examples of the best of Black people: State Education Commissioner Brenda Cassellius, Kenna Cottman, Dr. Josie Johnson and former Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton.

Students read about the lives of these four African American giants. They learned how Dr. Josie Johnson has been struggling for the civil rights of her people most of her life. When she was a teenager, she worked side by side with her father to get people to sign petitions to fight against the poll tax in Houston, Texas, which was money that African Americans were forced to pay if they wanted to register to vote.



Children were intrigued to learn that Commissioner Brenda Cassellius grew up poor and lived in the projects of Minneapolis. They also learned that she was offered a full scholarship to attend Gustavus Adolphus College. While she began her higher education at Gustavus Adolphus College, she did not finish there. After being called racial slurs, the college freshman walked away from her scholarship and went to study at the University of Minnesota—paying her tuition on her own, with the assistance of grants.

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Learning about Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton was also electrifying. The children did not know that she started her political career as councilmember and was mayor of the city of Minneapolis for two terms. They learned that a bridge is going to be dedicated to Minneapolis' first African American and female mayor in the fall of 2013.



Students were enthusiastic to learn more about the woman that has taught them dance for many years. Ms. Kenna has traveled to Ghana, Senegal and the Gambia in Africa. She is the founder and the artistic director of Voices of Culture Drum and Dance. Since 2008, her company has created and performed as well as studied West African drum and dance throughout Minnesota.

After educating themselves about the lives of these four women, the children worked in groups to write essays about each “shero”. Then they drew pictures of each woman and culminated their activities by making a life-size mannequin of each woman. The mannequins included wigs, painted faces and business suits; they even wore stockings and high heels.



The children worked hard to prepare for their presentations to these four talents. The day was April 18, 2013. The Twin Cities had a snowstorm, only matched by January outbursts. With

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huge wind gusts and snow coming down fast and furious; this was the day that 50 children at WE WIN Institute were doing their presentation for their “sheroes”. Even though everyone else in Minneapolis was cancelling events, WE WIN students said, “The show must go on.” What was equally amazing is that all four of these African American giants tracked through the storm to support the work of the students.

The program began with the recital of WE WIN rituals, which included the African Deservability Statement, the 9 Principles of Manhood and Womanhood and the Black National Anthem. The kindergarten through second graders did an African dance; followed by African drumming and dancing from the third through eighth graders. Hip-Hop artist, Chad Heslup, aka: Longshot, recited an original poem entitled, “We Honor You.” The kindergarteners came forward and told one fact that they knew about each of the revered guests. Each group of children shared their essays and posters with the audience; who were made up of a room full of proud parents.

Then the children presented their essays and posters to the women they studied. Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton thanked the children and said, “In this room is a president, a mayor, a congressman, a lawyer or a doctor. With our love and support our children can achieve their dreams.”

Dr. Josie Johnson eloquently thanked the children, and said, “As an elder in the community, I watch the brilliance of our children and am in awe of them. Some people actually say that our children cannot learn. They need to be here tonight. We see what our children can do, and we see how committed WE WIN is to these children. It has been said how important parents are, but it is equally important that adults are in the lives of our children. Remember, we grew up as a community with grandparents next door and other caring adults who would report misbehaviors to our parents. We have to get back to that. We have grown fearful of our children. Our children need us. “

Dr. Brenda Cassellius thanked the children and WE WIN Institute. She said that, “It is wonderful being honored as an African American women leader alongside Dr. Josie Johnson who is my mentor, Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton and Kenna Cottman. Governor Mark Dayton and I both see the importance of afterschool programs that help our children be successful academically and socially.”

The program culminated with a feast that included a cake with images of the “Sheroes” and a thank you. These women showed our children through their example that a person can be well known and successful, but that true leadership is about being of service. Mayor Sharon Sayles Belton, Dr. Brenda Cassellius, Kenna Cottman and Dr. Josie Johnson are examples of African American Excellence!