

not stopping NOW

After a year off, the Black History Program takes the stage with more than 50 participants putting on 24 performances

In the moment, sophomore La'Veanna Washington and junior Amyah Patterson sing "Freedom" by Beyoncé together during the Black History Program. "I was feeling very anxious but when the crowd engaged, I felt confident," Washington said. "The best part was when we were rapping and the crowd was shocked." | photo by robert leon



The auditorium slowly filled with people trying to talk over one another. Above the stage, a screen lowered, displaying the words, "Harlem Renaissance" in vibrantly stylized letters.

English teacher Natalie Johnson-Berry started to speak, calming the crowd of people awaiting a performance better than their average seminar class.

Johnson-Berry was given the role as sponsor of the Black History Program seven years ago.

"I was really stressed out initially," Johnson-Berry said about the expectations. "Miss Gonzalez was confident in me, but I told Miss Gonzalez, I said, 'Oh my goodness, I am doing the Hispanic Heritage Program and also the Black History Program.' So I felt a whole lot of pressure as someone who had only been at Shawnee Mission North for my second year. And I knew that if I didn't do a good job that it would almost be like that I'd be letting down the students and people because it'd be something that they would be looking forward to. So I knew I had to get it right."

The initial stress would eventually dissipate as years of successful Black History Programs occurred, until COVID canceled the Black History Program in 2021, resulting in less organization and less time to put into the show in 2022.

"This year was scary," Johnson-Berry said. "I only had one and a half rehearsals and a few meetings. It was like pulling off a miracle."

Although the recovery from COVID would provide setbacks, student coordinator senior Samantha Morinville was able to bounce back.

"COVID definitely changed a lot of things because about half of our school hasn't seen a program like this to know what to expect," Morinville said. "However, we were able to adjust and jump right into things, even with COVID-19 canceling our previous program. And I think this year had been like one of the smoothest rehearsals, there was no trouble, any issues or anyone backing out last minute. In terms of rehearsal, it went pretty smoothly."

Even with minimal preparations, the

program was ready by March with over 50 participants ready to speak and perform in a total of 24 acts.

"Having limited rehearsals, and with it being the first program that we've had in like two years," Morinville said. "I'm really proud with the results and proud to see what we were able to accomplish."

When the program was over, students left with one thing, more awareness of the Black experience.

"And so if we can put on a performance like this, that at the surface level looks like entertainment, but then we, you know, add the more important details and the blurbs and the information and the historical significance of everything before the performances," explained senior Ore Oluwa Oni (co-student coordinator). "Once we're able to add those things, I think people can come to an understanding of the bigger idea. I think it's an insight into the experiences that a lot of minorities in general are experiencing something that they won't see on a daily basis." | story by adriano peralta

a way with WORDS

Songs and poems performed during the Black History Program and the meaning behind them



Opening the Black History Program, 2017 Alumna Le'Taya Baker sings the Black National Anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing." "I was feeling somewhat nervous which I always get nervous before singing, but it's such a great adrenaline rush," Baker said. "The Black History program played a major part in me continuing to do my music even out of high school." | photo by robert leon



On the edge of the stage, freshmen Tyonna Davis and Toni Davis sway side to side singing the words to "Lean On Me" during the Black History Program's last performance. "The most exciting part was getting up on stage and being able to express how I felt about being a black young woman in America," Tyonna Davis said. "Watching everyone sing and dance and read their speeches." | photo by robert leon

Feeling the music, junior Mia Keith sings "Feeling Good" by Nina Simone who was one of her idols and an advocate for African Americans, women of color and women in general. "I was so scared," Keith said. "But as soon as I heard the crowd cheering for me a burst of strength just flowed through me and I was no longer afraid." | photo by robert leon



"I was singing a song I wrote called 'You're Mine' and I chose that song because it's fun, the chorus is catchy. I wrote the song about my husband who was in the audience. That was the first time I sang that song in front of a big audience. When the audio first cut out, my first thought was like 'uh oh' but hiccups happen. I was disappointed the audience wasn't able to hear my full song with the audio, but I've sung that song so many times that the music was still playing in my head. Once I realized the music had stopped I told myself 'the show must go on' and kept going."

Le'Toya Baker, 2017 Alumna



"The song I performed, 'I Have Nothing' by Whitney Houston was really important to me. Growing up with my parents and listening to R&B in the car, or while cleaning, this song really was a part of me while growing up. So, I wanted to perform it and show my parents so I could do the song justice. I'm glad I got the opportunity."

Nevaeh Elmore, 10

"I was reading my original poem 'Being a Black Girl' and these words, I'm sure, hit home for many black girls and women as we have all probably been told or felt one of these things. It was really important for me, not only to capture the negative experiences that we've all had, but to uplift black women and girls. After the show, a girl came up to me and explained to me that she had a black adopted sister who often expresses that she feels similar to the way I had expressed in my poem and she wanted a copy so she could read it to her. I told her to really listen to the little girl and make her feel proud of her culture by exposing her to it, but not appropriating it themselves. I was very grateful that my poem could have touched someone in that way."

Genessa Gillespie, 11

