

The Boston Globe

January 31, 2008



From left, Jasmine Taylor, Lisa Brea, Farah Jeune, and Bang Pham, all students at Fenway High School, watched a multimedia presentation, "Choosing to Participate, Facing History and Ourselves," at the Boston Public Library. (MICHELE MCDONALD/GLOBE STAFF)

A Message on Racism Reverberates

Exhibit focuses on personal stories to chronicle events

By Brian R. Ballou

Wide-eyed and pensive, five Fenway High School juniors sat in a dark projection room yesterday at the Boston Public Library and listened to a schoolgirl's recorded account about how she faced racism on her way to a new school in Little Rock, Ark., half a century ago. A picture of the schoolgirl beamed on-screen. She wore a white dress and sunglasses and clutched her books as an enraged crowd surrounded her.

"My great-grandmother could have gone through those things, because she was going to school during that time," said Jasmine Taylor, one of the students, pausing outside the projection room before continuing through the exhibit, "Choosing to Participate, Facing History and Ourselves."

The exhibit, which profiles communities and individuals who experienced stark or poignant episodes of racism, violence, and hate crimes, premiered in Boston 10 years ago, but has been on the road since then, showing in New York, Chicago, Memphis, and San Francisco. Now it is back.

The exhibit includes a depiction of the plight of nine African-American students attending a previously all-white school in Little Rock in the late 1950s, and the creators of the exhibit hope that account, along with three other true stories, will help youths deal with problems they might encounter in society today. Margot Stern Strom, the executive director of the exhibit, said she created it to let students know what previous generations went through and how they rose above issues of hate, racism, and violence.

"As a schoolteacher, I realized that students were being betrayed by not being exposed to our history, our complete history," Stern Strom said. "Kids want to know about hate and anger."

In addition to the story of the Little Rock Nine, the exhibit features the journey of a boy who leaves war-ravaged Cambodia as a refugee and is adopted by a family in New England and a short story about a Puerto Rican man who struggles with a decision he made not to aid a white woman, out of fear she would react negatively to him because of his race.

Yesterday, Mayor Thomas M. Menino of Boston went on the tour with the students and chatted with them along the way. He told them about an experience he had as a teenager, when he befriended a boy from South America who had been taunted by other students because of the color of his skin.

"I took a personal interest in him, and we became lifelong friends," Menino told the students.

Greg Coleman said he and his classmates were working on essays a couple of weeks ago about the Little Rock Nine and decided they should visit the exhibit as part of the exercise. In addition to Coleman and Taylor, the other students were Farah Jeune, Bang Pham, and Lisa Brea.

The Boston public school system incorporates the story of the Little Rock Nine into its curriculum for about 5,000 eighth-graders.

©The New York Times Company