

Bringing Performing Artists into Chatham Elementary Schools

Imagine if Jackie Robinson, the all-star African-American baseball player, were still alive and able to share his first-hand account of how he pushed the color barrier in America. Would we see the courage in his gait? Hear the lilt of frustration in his voice?

Some Chatham County students will have the opportunity to experience what life might have been like for the record-setting player when acclaimed actor and playwright Mike Wiley springs to life as Jackie Robinson at North Chatham Elementary School in his one-man production of Jackie Robinson: A Game Apart.

This performance is part of two artist-in-residence pilot programs at Chatham County Schools in partnership with the Chatham Arts Council. Wiley will also provide active hands-on introduction to the world of creative writing, storytelling, and dramatic interpretation that directly tie to academic goals. He will offer a professional development teacher workshop, two matinee student performances, and four days of student workshops.

The second residency will occur at Virginia Cross Elementary School this Fall when professional performing artists Serena Ebhardt and David zum Brunnen, also Chatham County residents, lead a program with fifth graders that bolsters core curriculum. Through journalistic interviews, students will create a script they will produce into a school-wide theatrical production complete with music, art and technology.

“As Chatham County citizens for over twenty years, David and I are thrilled to be contributing to Chatham Arts Council’s Pilot Year Artists-in-Schools Initiative,” Ebhardt said. “We hope that the work we do with students reaches beyond the classroom and creates connections between younger and older generations. It is not just about Arts-In-Education. It is about promoting integrity, self-discovery and the positive transformation of communities through our schools.”

“My work finds its heart in the stories that have shaped American history and cultures,” said Wiley, also a Chatham County resident. “I’m proud to play, live and finally work here where my roots can take hold and make a difference.”

The two artist-in-residence programs were funded by grants from the North Carolina Arts Council with matching funds provided by the Chatham County Commissioners, and managed by the Chatham Arts Council. Chatham County School teachers and administration collaborated with the Chatham Arts Council on the grant proposals to apply for the NCAC school residencies. The intent is to extend residencies like these to different Chatham County Schools each year.