

# Randolph teachers win grant to showcase Negro League baseball

By NICOLE ALLIEGRO Contributing Writer | Posted: Wednesday, July 10, 2013 1:32 pm

**RANDOLPH TWP.** -- With a \$1,000 grant and a lot of passion, enthusiasm and excitement, five educators from Randolph High School are launching an interdisciplinary unit on the influence of Negro leagues baseball.

In a truly collaborative effort, librarian Stephen Cullis, history teachers Daniel Austin and Ashley Kanya, English teacher Sonja Gutwerk, and physical education and health teacher David Poppy planned and designed a cross-curricular project that incorporates the study of Negro league baseball into the broader context of history, literature, health and sports. The grant was awarded by the Jerry Malloy Negro League Committee of the Society for American Baseball Research and was one of two in the nation.

“The whole thing [is] about all these people coming in from different subject areas with different strengths,” Cullis said. “Everybody added and contributed to a different aspect of how the importance of Negro league baseball fit in with whatever subject area they’re teaching.”

The unit will be most obviously included in history and law and government classes by examining how the Negro leagues—and the eventual integration of baseball—fits into discussions of civil rights, race relations, and culture.

Lessons and activities will also be worked into the English elective class, Sports and Literature, by studying the way the Negro leagues were represented in sports writing and media.

For Physical Education, the project will be incorporated into junior health classes with the Character Counts curriculum, which stresses mental and social health issues such as racism, prejudice, bullying and relationships.

Finally, the unit will culminate in a capstone project, aimed to coincide with Black History Month in February, to engage the broader community in a discussion of the history and influence of the Negro leagues, both past and present.

“This is something we want to make big,” Kanya said. “We’ve been so lucky to receive this grant, and we want to do it justice, and we want to be able to incorporate something the entire community would be proud of.”

The grant has already facilitated the purchase of several books and e-books on the subject for the library, which will be utilized not only by students involved in the project but will also be available to the school community. Cullis said the team will also look into purchasing other resources, like iPad applications and video materials, as the unit continues to develop.

“Through our own budget, too, we’re going to be supporting this project as much as we can by getting any supplemental stuff that we need,” he explained.

The group recently traveled to Newark for the Jerry Malloy Negro League Conference, where they presented their award-winning ideas and collected more information and resources for their project.

Poppy also said that the conference introduced them to the Newark Eagles, a popular Negro league baseball team at the time, which prompted the team to look into sponsoring former Negro league players or others in the association as guest speakers on the subject.

“Baseball...was what you did on Saturday and Sunday afternoon years ago, before there was TV and all the media we have,” Poppy said. “I don’t think the kids have a realization of their roots like maybe they could or should.”

Austin, a baseball fan and 20-year educator, said that the sport reinforces some of the larger themes in history and society, including those of perseverance, adversity, patience and equality.

“For me, looking at baseball...it’s about equality and rights. Baseball is a microcosm of America,” Austin explained. “We cheer for the underdog. That’s what America is about—we’ve been cheering for the underdog since the American Revolution.”

Poppy, who has been an educator for 38 years, said that the team hopes to involve interested students in the project and then branch out to educate younger kids in the district, too.

“I think it’s really important that kids here learn about this...partly because we don’t have a large African American population,” he said. “You have to understand that we’ve evolved to where we are now, but things take time, and there is still prejudice in the world.”

The teachers also plan to use the recent film *42*, a biographical flick about Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers, to make the subject even more relevant.

“That actually drew a lot of attention to the subject itself, and I think that is something that will really help fuel this project,” Kanya said of the movie. “Baseball is such a relatable topic to these kids; whether they like it or not, they know about it.”

Austin added that the desegregation of baseball in the 50s and 60s also extended into the 70s with Hispanic players joining Major League Baseball, and then in the 90s with Asian players, which is another way to make the unit current.

“The whole thing is, don’t just know about the facts, [but] make connections for yourself,” Kanya, a teacher for six years, added. “Bringing history alive is such a huge part of this.”

Cullis is just finishing his first year as school librarian and instructional media educator, but already, he has been instrumental in bringing students, faculty and community members together. The project is set to launch in September.

“You have all these teachers that are collaborating on a certain project together that they see the value of, and they came together with their own set of ideas, and it just built on to something pretty elaborate and complex and great, something that we think the whole school would benefit from,” Cullis said. “This is what teaching is.”