**Leaders of Today: In the Footsteps of Frederick Douglass**

On Tuesday, March 22, Dumas Lafontant of the Friends of Frederick Douglass visited with 7th and 8th graders to deliver exciting news and an inspiring message. As a result of our students’ letters advocating for a statute of Frederick Douglass in Roxbury, the Boston Art Commission recently decided to move forward and support the project. The Friends of Frederick Douglass, a group of prominent local artists, have been lobbying for the project for four years. They had reached a dead end until the Commission received the students’ letters.

Mr. Lafontant praised students for their civic engagement. “What you have done is remarkable,” he told students. “Your efforts helped push the statue project forward. People always say that young people are the leaders of tomorrow. But with your actions, you have shown that young people are leaders of today. I hope you continue to choose to fight for justice and equity throughout your lives.”

**From Frederick Douglass to Ferguson**

Students wrote letters advocating for the Frederick Douglass monument as part of their yearlong Humanities expedition, “From Frederick Douglass to Ferguson.” After investigating the recent incidents of racial violence that have gripped our nation, students looked to history to find the answers to the questions: *How did we get here? What is the connection between our past and our present*? During their investigation of slavery, students conducted a close reading of a complex text, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. A music integration component, led by Kat Jara, explored the enduring power of spirituals. Students sang a unique arrangement of *Amazing Grace*, weaving Douglass’ powerful words into spoken-word verses.



At the close of the Douglass investigation, students learned about a proposal to build a monument to this iconic leader in Roxbury’s Frederick Douglass Peace Garden. They examined multiple proposals from different artists and chose the one they thought was most powerful. A majority of students selected Mario Chiodo’s inspiring sculpture. Chiodo’s proposal was also the choice of the official selection committee.

Students were therefore outraged when they learned, through an article in the Boston Globe, that the project had been stalled, for unknown reasons, by the Boston Art Commission. They decided to use the power of their pens to write letters to the editor (to the Globe and the Bay State Banner), as well as to the Director of the Boston Art Commission, and members of the Friends of Frederick Douglass. Although all students in both grades composed letters, students carefully chose six letters they felt best represented their point of view to submit to the newspapers, the Art Commission, and the Friends.

**An Invitation from the Boston Art Commission**

After receiving the student letters, Karin Goodfellow, the Director of the Art Commission, invited students to attend two Commission meetings—the first on March 22 to help students understand the Commission’s decision-making process, and the second on April 12 to present their case to the Art Commission. One commission member wrote: “I am extremely impressed with the arguments of your students and how much they care about having Frederick Douglass recognized as the intellect, leader, and activist that he was. His is a powerful story and I can understand why they are so inspired by it.”

However, it was not until Dumas Lafontant of the Friends of Frederick Douglass visited with students on March 22nd that we learned the full impact of the students’ letters. Mr. Lafontant reported that the Art Commission had agreed to reinstate the project and to build the sculpture at a different, more visible location—Tremont Street in Roxbury. The Art Commission also agreed to sponsor a community meeting in Roxbury to announce the project.

**An Invitation from the Boston Globe**

Boston Globe reporter, Astead Herndon, was delighted to hear about the students’ impact. At his invitation, 7th graders toured the Globe on April 5th and got a behind the scenes look at the work of a major daily newspaper. They also learned how a Metro reporter works a story from idea to research to writing to publication in just one day.

**Boston Art Commission Meeting**In the late afternoon of April 12th, 7th and 8th graders headed downtown to make their presentation to the Boston Art Commission. Instead of making a formal presentation, they chose to perform a skit that demonstrated the process of how they developed the ideas expressed in their letters. 8th-grader Arianna Rodriguez spoke for the group when she proudly noted: “We 7th and 8th graders have done something more than just speaking about having our voices heard. We are ACTUALLY speaking out and voicing our opinions to make a difference and a change in the communities that we live in. . . It is exciting to know that people of higher power are eager to listen to and to hear our voices.” At the end of the presentation, Director Karin Goodfellow invited students to participate in a community meeting in Roxbury to seek input about the new site for the statue.

**Middle Schoolers Make Headlines**

Globe reporter, Astead Herndon, attended the meeting and interviewed students after their presentation. On April 26, our 7th and 8th graders made headlines in the Boston Globe! The article, “Young Fans Call for a Memorial to Douglass,” quotes extensively from the students’ letters and notes how the “students’ advocacy has energized the longstanding effort to pay tribute to Douglass.”

**Students Perform Amazing Grace at Community Meeting at Northeastern**

Seeking community input for a new location for a Frederick Douglass statue in Roxbury, the Commission held a meeting on Saturday afternoon, April 30th, at Northeastern University. Four middle schoolers opened the meeting with their original rendition of “Amazing Grace,” laced with spoken-word verses from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* Students also spoke out during the meeting, passionately arguing what a statue of Douglass would mean for Boston’s children of color.

**Channel 5 Takes Note**

The April 26th Boston Globe article caught the attention of Channel 5, CityLine reporter Nicole C. Derosiers, who visited the school on June 6th to film Valencia Patilla’s Humanities class, and to interview Ms. Patilla and three students about what inspired them to take action for a statue of Frederick Douglass. Junior Fuentes, Ezekiel Fanfan, and Kayleen Guzman made the school proud as they spoke with poise and passion about their admiration for Douglass, who continues to be a symbol of perseverance, courage, and freedom for our young students. The Sunday afternoon show featuring Conservatory Lab middle schoolers will air this summer. <http://www.wcvb.com/article/sunday-august-7-2016-preserving-history/8238081>

Through this experience, students have been able to answer a vital question posed at the beginning of the expedition: *Where is my power?* They have seen that through civic engagement and the power of their words, they can make a difference in their communities and take a stand for social justice.

Students can feel enormous pride for their instrumental role in building a monument in the heart of Roxbury that symbolizes the struggle for racial freedom and justice. 7th grader’s Ezekiel Fan Fan’s words say it best:

I’m writing this letter to show that not just adults want a change, but so do kids.

All the students at CLCS have a big root in us that leads from Mr. Douglass’ hard

work. The kids at CLCS love music, and so we practice all the time. We also want to learn. Mr. Douglass’ roots are in us because when he was a kid, he would do anything

to get an education. Even when the masters tried to make sure couldn’t learn to read or write, that didn’t stop his motivation. So we would love to see a statue of this great

man to inspire us to follow him and become leaders who change the world, just like

Mr. Douglass.

By Rhonda Berkower, Curriculum Specialist and Valencia Patilla, Middle School Humanities Teacher