

H.E.L.P. Project Hosts "The Nativity Story"

Christmas Program takes place in the Howard Performing Arts Center

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Benton Harbor High School students participate in "The Nativity Story." (Photo by Darren Heslop, IMC staff photographer)

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On Friday, Dec. 8, 2017, the Human Empowerment Life Project (H.E.L.P.) team hosted "The Nativity Story" in the Howard Performing Arts Center for approximately 460 grades 2–5 students from the Benton Harbor area.

The program portrayed the Christmas story, including scenes with the shepherds, Mary and Joseph and the three magi. The dialogue and music were a powerful testament to the need for hope and to positive ways that people can live and serve others in their daily lives.

Carlisle Sutton, director of Community Engagement, Integration & Service at Andrews University, led the event with the assistance of many others. David Faehner, vice president for University Advancement, sponsored the facility and technicians. Alayne Thorpe, dean for the Schools of Graduate Studies and Distance Education & International Partnerships, worked with her team to provide supplies for gift bags. Elynda Bedney, assistant vice president for Student Financial Services, also worked with her staff to provide refreshments for the children after the

program. Marguerite Samuels, director of the musical ministry Journey, and Stephen Zork, professor of music and conductor of Andrews University Singers, performed musical selections. Throughout the program, H.E.L.P. team members played an active role by guiding children to seats and sitting in the audience with the children.

The local community also contributed to make this event possible. Sutton says, "Principals, teachers, parents and the administration of the Benton Harbor area schools all worked to ensure the students were afforded the opportunity to attend." One of these individuals was Ronnika Williams, from the Boys and Girls Club, who partnered with Sutton to mentor Benton Harbor High School students in learning their roles for the play. Neighbor to Neighbor in Berrien Springs helped by providing the stage props.

The Nativity Story event first took place in 2016 when Sutton learned of the Benton Harbor schools' need of holiday programming. It provides an opportunity to expose the students to high-quality acting by using an historical approach to the nativity story that incorporates life lessons on issues pertinent to the children. Some of these issues include responsibility, respect for others and standing up to peer pressure. The choice to involve the Andrews University Department of Music was also a very intentional decision to infuse different genres of music throughout the drama. Sutton explains, "We believe that early exposure to interesting experiences in a university environment will also increase the elementary students' interest in learning, foster a desire to work toward attending university and build a college-bound culture."

This is the first year that the cast for the play was chosen from Benton Harbor High School students rather than Andrews students. Additionally, Xiomara "Pepper" Urbina, a third-grade community student, helped with the music. According to Sutton, the high school students have already been profoundly impacted with the experience of acting in this program. Because of their experience, they are all interested in being part of a drama club. He says, "The H.E.L.P. team believes a drama club would continue to give disadvantaged students opportunities to develop self-confidence and demonstrate skills that they work hard to perfect." The seed for this confidence was planted in these students as they acted in The Nativity Story and were successfully affirmed as being a part of something bigger than themselves.

The ultimate hope is that this Christmas program will continue to bless the Benton Harbor Area community as well as the Andrews University participants. This hope was seen in the eyes of the children as they excitedly watched the play and clapped with the music. It was seen through the high school actors as they began to understand their potential for greatness and worked to harness and direct their talent in positive ways.

Sutton says, "I hope that we at Andrews University will continue to appreciate the blessings we have been afforded, continue to be intentional about connecting in meaningful ways, and go the distance to help others understand their inestimable value."

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