Rethinking history's heroes

Parkland teacher says heroes are ordinary people doing extraordinary things

by Warren Parish
Staff Writer

Activist-educator Alana Murray's world studies students are rethinking history's heroes and how they achieved great things.

"If you start with the premise that kids interact everyday with people who are doing pretty extraordinary things, then it gives them a sense of empowerment," said Murray, a teacher at Parkland Middle School in Aspen Hill.

That idea is nothing new to Murray, who comes from a family active in the civil rights movement for generations. Growing up with examples like her paternal grandfather, Donald Gaines Murray, the first African American to attend the University of Maryland School of Law, she says heroes are not born extraordinary, but are ordinary people who learn to do great things as they confront problems.

Murray tries to get that point across daily, teaching from the instructional and community resource guide she contributed to and co-edited, "Putting the Movement Back into Civil Rights Teaching."

The more staid lecture model in which students busily record names and dates for memorization has been dropped in favor of historical activities and lesson plans designed to get her students talking, thinking and, eventually, changing things.

"You want your child in her classroom," Parkland Principal Carlos Hamlin said. "She's active and engaging. Kids want to learn. They want to do what she needs them to do because of her. She makes you feel guilty when
A history of her own

Born into a well-educated, activist family, Murray grew up with a ready wealth of accessible history. Her ability to trace her family “as far back as Reconstruction” is testament to the stories she has heard over the years.

Since her ancestors were freed from enslavement, Murray’s family has valued education and accomplishment. One relative helped found Morris Brown College in Atlanta. Her mother, a professor of psychology, is a department chair at Georgia Southern University. Her father, active in Washington, D.C., politics, has a master’s degree in social work. Her uncle is a prominent southern photographer.

Probably her most famous relative is grandfather Donald Gaines Murray, the first African American, who, with the help of a young Baltimore attorney named Thurgood Marshall, broke the racial barrier at the University of Maryland Law School in the 1930s.

Like the Montgomery bus boycott years later, the lawsuit was the product of a search for the right candidate whose case could provide an effective legal and political rallying point from which to attack segregation.

“He fit the bill,” Murray said simply.

An Amherst graduate with good grades, Murray’s grandfather qualified academically, but was denied admission based upon his race. Marshall, who later became the first African-American Supreme Court justice, had an appealing case that captured media attention.

The lawsuit, wrote famed columnist H.L. Mencken in “The [Baltimore] Evening Sun,” came down to the simple question of “whether the Law School is to be abandoned to Ku Kluxery in order to protect the so-called college that costs the taxpayers immense sums every year.”

After a protracted legal battle, in which university regents fought, lost and appealed court rulings, Gaines Murray was admitted.

Now his son, Donald Gaines Murray Jr., teaches community development at the same university.

The latest generation to come of age is following the family trend favoring the law, education and activism.

Alana Murray’s sister is a professor of law at the University of Mississippi. And Murray earned a bachelor’s degree in government and politics from the University of Maryland, a master’s degree in education from Brown University and participated in a Fulbright Summer Scholars program in Mexico.

Since 1998, the self-described educator-activist has taught in the Montgomery County Public Schools system.

“When I began to teach,” she said, “I wanted to carry on my family’s legacy. I decided my debt to my ancestors’ struggle would be repaid by teaching a more complex history than the one I’d been taught in my [kindergarten through grade] 12 education.”

In history, complexity usually does not come without a dose of controversy, something to which parents have not always wanted to expose their children. Murray says she has navigated the sensitive issue of racism without upsetting her students’ families, a calm she credits to presenting all points of view and Montgomery County’s culture of diversity.

“Some people would argue that that’s not the role of a teacher,” she said when asked about being an activist-educator. “But, anytime you take a story as a teacher and really try to get to the truth of it, you’re taking a stand to a certain extent. It’s not like I’m some rabble-rousing leftist. But I am very committed to issues of social justice.”