



Tuskegee Airman Sgt. Shade M. Lee speaks to students at Conackamack Middle School in Piscataway.

February 26, 2009

Tuskegee Airman shares his story in Piscataway

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Students at Conackamack Middle School were in a festive mood Thursday as they celebrated Black History Month and reflected on the nation's journey from segregation to the election of a black president.

The keynote speaker was Sgt. Shade M. Lee, a Tuskegee Airman, and a winner of the Congressional Gold Medal. Lee's speech was arranged by the RISE Foundation.

The Tuskegee Airmen were the Army Air Corps' first all-black combat unit, which fought during World War II. The airmen are named for the air base where they were trained, the Tuskegee Army Air Field in Tuskegee, Ala.

Lee, 87, told the students that when he joined the Army at age 17, the military was still racially segregated. Lee said he fought to end segregation in the military, and eventually made his case to the vice chief of the Air Force, who subsequently desegregated the military by ordering that personnel assignments be based on ability, not on race.

"If you see something that needs to be done, you might be called a whistleblower," he said. "But don't be afraid to go through the proper channels to see that it gets done."

Lee was preceded by a series of student presenters. First was Kelly Walker, who came over from Piscataway High School to sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," known as the black national anthem.

Walker was followed by eighth-grader Taylor, 14, who told his fellow students about his trip in January to President Barack Obama's inauguration.

Taylor's remarks began with a photo slide show and tales of navigating a crowded Washington, D.C. Then tears began to stream down Taylor's face as he described the emotions of the day.

"Everywhere you look, you have people breaking down in tears, because it was such a momentous occasion," Taylor said. "And it shows you no matter what race you are, we as a people have come together — white, black, Hispanic; that there is no longer any hatred; that we can all celebrate as one people, not as our separate races."

Fellow eighth-grader Nylah, 13, read the poem "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou. Nylah said she believes it is important that Black History Month be a time to celebrate the progress the country has made.

"It is important that we celebrate what change has come and how history has been made and how it has affected America as a country," she said.

Lee told the students that individual ambition can break down the barriers others erect. He said that when he went to grade school in Schenectady, N.Y., he was the only black student in the school. At Conackamack in 2008, about a third of the students were white, 28 percent were black, 25 percent were Asian, and 13 percent were Hispanic, according to the New Jersey State Report Card for the school.

"If I can survive in an environment where I was the only minority, you can do it where there's a mixture of 15 percent or more," he said.