

# Common ground found through black history

By SUE HOFFMAN

The sights and sounds of Guinea, in West Africa, captivated a young audience last week at Roxbury Elementary School in Solon. Dressed in authentic Guinean clothing, a six-person ensemble from Passport Project Inc. in Cleveland sang and danced while performing on a variety of percussion instruments.

Their performance at a school-wide assembly was the culminating activity of the school's focus on Black History Month, according to Principal Carla Rodenbucher. Throughout the month, students were involved in classroom activities involving the celebration.

Between songs, Passport Project founder Chloe Hopson discussed the importance of African music to U.S. culture.

"How many of you like rock 'n' roll?" she asked. Today's popular music has African roots, she said. "If you like rhythm and blues, the origin was in West Africa. Listen for the sounds that might tie in with today's music."

Vibrations could be felt throughout the gymnasium as the Passport Project played a variety of instruments, including the dundun drum from Guinea, skin-covered djembe drums, which originated in Africa, and balafons, wooden-keyed percussion instruments similar to xylophones.

Ms. Hopson and Ceco Selinas performed high-energy dances and, with the percussionists, sang a variety of songs in Susu, a language of Guinea.

Students clapped to the beat.

Leading the percussionists was Mamadou "Mohamed" Sadio Tounkara, a dance and percussion teacher from Guinea who taught the performers and provided the choreography.

"Music and dance are part of the culture," said Ms. Hopson, who traveled to Guinea twice in recent years. "All over the world, people dance and make



Photo by Itamar Gat

Passport Project founder Chloe Hopson demonstrated and discussed the importance of African music to U.S. culture during the assembly at Roxbury Elementary School.

music. With rhythm, we are able to communicate. We may not share the same language, but we find a connection through rhythm, music and dance," she said.

"We are here to celebrate Black History Month. Black history is always happening. It's a part of U.S. history, and it isn't just in February. It continues all through the year."

Ms. Hopson, an African-American, told the students why black history is

important. While there were many black heroes, "very often, those accomplishments were taken out of American history," she said. Years ago, fashion magazines only featured white people, she said. "Black is beautiful, just as white is beautiful, just as Chinese is beautiful. Everyone is beautiful."

The group also featured percussionists Deirdre Garvey, Donald Davis and Marceau James.

In addition to performing, Ms.

Hopson and Mr. Tounkara taught the students to sing an African song similar to the American "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes."

Ms. Hopson said the Passport Project's mission is "building community through the arts."

"Let's celebrate each other," she said. "Let's get to know each other and celebrate our background. We have similarities, and we have differences. Let's celebrate it all."