

Rousing ceremony commemorates Black History Month

By Scott Woosley, DDC Command Affairs

The Defense Distribution Center Headquarters celebrated Black History Month Feb. 20 with the rumble of drums and traditional African dances.

The lively entertainment was provided by Kulu Mele, an African American Dance group based in Philadelphia.

The theme of the celebration was From Slavery to Freedom: the History of Africans in America. Celebrations like this are designed to showcase the differences between cultures, but to do it in a way that brings everyone together to celebrate those differences.

“I feel that the importance of this program is to enlighten all people about the contributions of people of African



Baba Robert Crowder, foreground, plays his drum during the opening performance of the DDC celebration of Black History Month. Crowder is the founder and director of Kulu Mele, a Philadelphia-based African American dance ensemble. Crowder is in his seventies.

descent to the development of America,” said Columbus Dolberry, manager of the DDC’s Black Employment Program and the organizer of the event. “Cultural entertainment enhances the educational value of the event for our employees.”

Kulu Mele’s performance and Karen James’ oral presentation certainly achieved that goal if the audience’s reaction was any indication. Audience members were tapping their feet to the beat of the drums and James narrative, humorous speaking style kept the audience’s attention throughout her presentation.

“Black history also includes the time when our people were kings, queens, inventors, business owners and strong family members, not just captive Africans in America.”

James also feels that lively ceremonies like this are much better venues for informing people.

“These events bring people together in a comfortable environment and make it easier to deal with difficult issues,” said Karen James, who works for the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. “We often have to be reminded that we are all separate, but one.”



Karen James of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission relates the history of civil rights in Pennsylvania.

James, the keynote speaker for the event and the state coordinator for Underground Railroad history, spoke to the audience about Pennsylvania’s history of ensuring freedom for all its residents. She related how Pennsylvania led the nation in ensuring freedom for African Americans.

“Imagine how it felt for blacks in Pennsylvania,” James said. “They were surrounded (by slave states), but in Pennsylvania we had the first black millionaires buying property, running businesses and hiring and firing people of all races—and this was before the 1800s.”

James’ humorous and narrative style made what can be an uncomfortable



Two Kulu Mele dancers perform a modern dance routine.

topic, entertaining and informative.

“Mrs. James didn’t just remind us of the contributions African Americans made to this country, she pointed out pieces of U.S. history where many white settlers in Pennsylvania fought with bordering states, demanding equality for all,” said RaShon Robinson, a traffic management specialist with the DDC. “She also confirmed for me that there is still a need for education about all ethnic backgrounds both in our personal and professional lives.”

Robinson also feels that Black History Month is about educating people that Africans were more than just former slaves.

“Black history also includes the time when our people were kings, queens, inventors, business owners and strong family members, not just captive Africans in America,” he said.

Kulu Mele ended the ceremony with several cultural dances including a traditional dance and a more modern, urban performance by two of the



Pieces of African art from the collection of DDC employee Leslie Whittaker were displayed as part of DDC’s celebration of Black History Month.

group’s younger members. The group’s performances are influenced by many cultures, including Guinea, Nigeria, Brazil, Haiti and Cuba.

Dolberry had worked with Kulu Mele several years ago, and knew they would impress those who attended the ceremony. The energy of the group’s performance elicited a standing ovation from the crowd at the end of the program.

“I knew that adding them to this program would expose our employees to a part of African culture that would inspire them and make them look forward to our next program,” he said.

The celebration also included displays of pieces of African art and items from the Negro League baseball teams. The displays helped illuminate both the struggles of Africans in America and the richness of their culture.

“Our goal in the Equal Employment Opportunity Office is to make all of our events as exciting as this one,” Dolberry said. “That will attract more people to the events and help us all to embrace our diversity.”

DDYJ forklift wranglers show expert skill at the rodeo

By Yeoman 3rd Class Neadd Smith, DDYJ

Forklift operators at the Defense Distribution Depot Yokosuka, Japan, demonstrated their knowledge, skills, and abilities of forklift operation during a recent lift truck rodeo competition. The rodeo’s goal was to promote safe forklift operation, exhibit the proficiency of the forklift operators, and to have some fun while doing so.

The event was kicked off with opening remarks from DDYJ Commanding Officer Navy Cmdr. Will A. Clarke. Next, Rick Atchley, director of the motor vehicle support division and the organizer of the event, was awarded a commander’s coin. There were 25 participants



A DDYJ forklift operator works against the clock to place a ball on a traffic cone.

along with seven judges to observe the competitors’ performance in five different skilled events. The events tested all physical and mental attributes of the forklift operators.

In a practical demonstration of skills, drivers in the “Lift Truck Wrangle” were timed as they maneuvered a loaded forklift through a narrow pathway. Operators had a ball at the “Having a Ball” station where drivers tried to balance a suspended tennis ball on a traffic cone. “Shoot the Bull” called for good depth perception and careful operation as they had to pick up a basketball with their forks and drop it through a basketball hoop. The timing had to be right at the “Time to Check Your Gear” area where they pre-checked their equipment by memory as opposed to using a checklist, a requirement prior to operating any forklift.

Like any rodeo, there was plenty of food including hot dogs, chili dogs and frito pies prepared by the DDYJ Morale Entertainment Advisory Committee. “I saw our employees having quite a good time and learning techniques from each other they might not have had the chance to share,” said Atchley.

The competition boosted camaraderie among participants and spectators alike and encouraged forklift drivers to cultivate their skills and raise safety awareness in the workplace. It was a great time to recognize the hard work and dedication of the forklift operators. Afterwards, certificates were awarded to the top three cowboys in each event.