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Dancing and drumming drive post-vacation blues away

By Leslie Friday, Staff Writer
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Students of the William Mitchell School found how to nix post-school vacation doldrums: shake that booty.

On Monday, Feb. 26, students and staff were treated to the toe-tapping beats and hip-swishing rhythms of the Bamidele Dancers & Drummers. Instruments of all shapes and sizes were spread across the gymnasium stage floor as the performers, dressed in vibrantly striped prints and white fabric, pulled the audience into the show.



The presentation was as much education as it was entertainment.

"In Africa, and in many places in the world, dance and music is part of the culture," said Marilyn Middleton-Sylla, Bamidele's director and one of its dancers. "It's part of what people do in their everyday lives."



Sekou Sylla from the Bamidele Dancers and Drummers performs for students at the Mitchell Elementary School. (2/26/07). (Keith E. Jacobson/Staff Photographer)

Be it for a wedding, birthday or harvest, each event has its own dance. And "every dance has its own special music and rhythm," Middleton-Sylla said.

Bamidele, pronounced *baumi-de-LAY*, has been performing since 1983 throughout New England and around the world at schools, festivals and workshops. The group works primarily with West African, Caribbean and Brazilian music and dance. Bamidele's performance wrapped up Mitchell's celebration of Black History month. The school and parent teacher organization contacted Bamidele through the Young Audiences of Massachusetts, an organization that links artist with local schools.

"I love those folks," said Carol Bonnar, executive director of YAMA. "I go to one of their performances and I can hardly sit still."

With her bare feet planted firmly on the stage, Middleton-Sylla greeted the crowd and introduced her fellow performers — Sekou Sylla, a dancer and musician; and Jamemurrell Stanley, a multitalented drummer who performed in a horsehair headdress.

"We're gonna need help in our program," Middleton-Sylla said. She asked for dancers and dozens of tiny hands shot into the air. But first, the three had to warm up the stage.

The first performance was a welcome dance. While Middleton-Sylla guided a crowd chant, Sylla — her husband — paced the stage with a handheld instrument called a talking drum. The two broke into dance, moving their hands out and back toward their bodies in giant hugging motions. Stanley held the beat with a jimbay, a handmade drum from Guinea, West Africa. Soon, the performers pulled metal bells, drums and a giant, gourd-shaped string instrument into the mix.

No sooner had the applause ended, Middleton-Sylla dropped down to the gymnasium floor, mingling with the children sitting cross-legged before her. She spoke, eyes wide, of families ripped from their homes in West Africa and brought to work on the Caribbean Islands.

From the crowd, a high-pitched voice — precocious and curious — asked, "Slaves?"

Middleton-Sylla nodded slightly, saying the people were made slaves. She spoke softly, yet with conviction. Tiny heads upturned as they listened to her story. These groups of people, she said, knew they had to escape. And to do so, they needed a signal.

Suddenly, a deep, billowing blow came from outside the gymnasium. Small backs straightened and eyes grew wide.

"Listen for the signal," Middleton-Sylla said. "It's not an elephant."

Just then, Sylla bounded through the door and between the aisles of students. At every couple gazelle-like leaps, he stopped and blew into a giant conch shell clutched in his hand.

With the initial shock over, Middleton-Sylla plucked four children from the audience. Each stood with a horsehair wand and directed their peers as the group launched into its second song. Their waves and hip shakes weren't on beat, but their smiles were right on.

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The rest of the show was filled with prompts to chant, wave and bop to the rhythms bouncing from Sylla's and Stanley's agile hands. A Brazilian samba brought dozens of children to the stage as they followed Middleton-Sylla in a dance routine. She provided an explanation for each new move — education and locomotion combined. Some meant welcome, others breaking free from bonds, still others celebration.

"There is so little positive information about Africa," said Middleton-Sylla in a later interview, adding that the continent was filled with more than just sickness, poverty and war.

But children were not the only ones who got an education in rhythm. Middleton-Sylla pulled teachers and administrators onstage in their wake.

"If you are above 18 years, six months and 10 days, you must come up to the stage," dared Middleton-Sylla, saying a drum gave her the message. More than a dozen teachers slunk to positions beside the dancers, trying to hide behind the stage curtains. Soon, even Principal Mike Schwinden was swinging in stride with the lead dancer.

"I can tell when the staff really gets into something," Schwinden said later. "They were really enjoying it."

The principal said the show was an energy boost for returning students as well. "With kids coming off a week of vacation, this is just a great way to get them pumped up," Schwinden said.

Bamidele performed twice at Mitchell, once in the morning for kindergarten through second graders and again in the afternoon for the rest of the school.

Enjoying a quick hot chocolate break between shows, Sylla — who is from Guinea, West Africa — said he enjoys making people happy with his country's music.

"That's what I like to bring," Sylla said, "more diversity to the country."

Middleton-Sylla said her favorite part of performing is having an opportunity to reach so many young people and educate them about Africa.

"They're like sponges," she said, "ready and eager to soak it all up."

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