

Magician's Tuskegee Airmen act a fun lesson on black history

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Arkansas-based magician Tommy Terrific puts flight helmets on Mario Becerra and Jemaria Owens during his educational magic show about the WWII Tuskegee Airmen at the Suburban Acres Library. MICHAEL WYKE / Tulsa World

The joy of learning had a sound on Wednesday.

More than 30 third-grade students from Greeley Elementary School visited the Suburban Acres library for a magic show and black history lesson, and the sound of their "learning" - wows, laughter, giggles and squeals - had some passing adults wishing they were kids again.

Tommy Diaz, known as Tommy Terrific, is in Tulsa for two days of shows about the Tuskegee Airmen. This particular show is one in a series of educational acts he's been doing for Black History Month for three years.

Diaz chose the Tuskegee Airmen, fixtures in black history and recently the subject of the George Lucas-produced "Red Tails," because though the history-changing men are known, they aren't covered much, he said.

Before 1940, most blacks in the U.S. military were relegated to service and labor battalions. As part of an experiment, U.S. Army Air Force selected a group of African-American men to be trained in flying and maintaining combat aircraft. The Tuskegee Airmen became the face of African-American involvement in World War II and, in overcoming racism and prejudice, paved the way for full integration of the military.

'Uncle Fumpernauter, where are you?'

"Has anyone seen my Uncle Fumpernauter? He's supposed to be here to do the magic show today!" Diaz, now Tommy Terrific, breathlessly asked the audience to help start the show.

"He's in the box! He's in the box," the children yelled knowingly.

"Should I open the box?" he asked.

"Yea!"

"Nooo," whined one small voice in reluctance.

There was no Uncle Fumpernauter, but instead a black magician's cape, in that box. And Tommy, coyly warning the children he was new to this magic thing, asked if he could try putting on the show himself.

Absolutely.

He pulled out a puzzle box of huge pieces. "Whoa! These pieces are huge! Look at this! I wonder what kind of puzzle this is. Wait a minute, I know what puzzle this is, it's of those airmen. What are they called, the um ..."

"Tuskegee Airmen," a girl answered.

"Oh! The Terrific Airmen?" Tommy asked.

"No!" A single voice charged abruptly.

"Oh oh oh, the Turbulence Airmen?" he asked.

"No, TUSK-E-GEE," came the answer.

Navigated by a "magician's handbook," Tommy and the children went through a picture book, page by page, answering questions about the historic airmen and performing magic tricks as the book directed.

"We've got another question," Tommy said. "True or false: During WWII, the Tuskegee Airmen were subject to racial discrimination both in and outside the army?"

"TRUE!!"

The correct answer meant that a student could take a piece from the puzzle box and lay it against a standing display.

True or false: The flight program at Tuskegee received publicity when first lady Hillary Clinton inspected it in 1941?

"False. First lady Eleanor Roosevelt inspected the program," Tommy informed the group.

"Hillary's not that old."

Magic tricks - some with balloons, some with handkerchiefs that grew as big as parachutes - dotted the story.

"How did he do that?" asked Karen Knight, a Greeley parent facilitator, about the parachute trick.

"Usually all (the children) hear about is Martin Luther King," Knight said. "There's more there, and they need to know."

Diaz, who is based in Little Rock, has been doing magic for eight years at birthday parties, schools and libraries. For Diaz, the shows are about teaching children something new and having fun.

"I want them to be inspired to learn more about the Tuskegee Airmen for themselves," Diaz said.

"The Tuskegee Airmen had dreams to fly," E'laighana Lewis, 8, said. She was one of the students to don vintage aviator caps, pliable with sewn-on goggles, during the show.

Although the historic information was lost at points, drowned out by the raucous behavior of the young audience, Tommy Terrific had achieved his goal.

Lesson learned.

Tommy Terrific and His Tuskegee Airman Show will be at Kendall Whier Library and South Broken Arrow Library on Thursday before Diaz takes his show back on the road.

For more information visit, tulsaworld.com/tulsalibrary