



Celebrating



#5 The Struggle for Civil Rights in Baseball

by Bob Kann

Baseball is often called “America’s Pastime.” It has played a massive role in shaping the nation and culture. Since the early twentieth century, people across the country have been captivated by playing or watching baseball games or by reading accounts of it in newspapers.

In 2015, A@L initiated a multifaceted project having students and teachers explore the struggle for civil rights through the lens of baseball played both by women and men. Students learned how women kept baseball in the public eye during World War II and how Negro League players worked to overcome racism so they could play ball.

The All American Girls Professional Baseball League

From 1943-1954, more than 500 women, ages 14-28, played professional baseball in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL). They left their homes, their families, their friends, and often their jobs to do something they loved to do--play baseball. Playing in the league gave the women the chance to test their physical and emotional limits, and in the process expand them. They played hard, they played well, they played to win, and the fans loved them for it.

The women of the AAGPBL contributed to the changed belief that women and girls were too delicate to play sports like baseball. They helped open the door for the many opportunities that girls and women have to play today, including passage of the 1972 Title IX law which enabled thousands of girls and young women to play competitive sports. The women of the AAGPBL were pioneers in the world of women’s sports and were indeed in a League of Their Own. They also inspired a movie by that same name.



Kenosha native Joyce Westerman played in the AAGPBL for eight years as a catcher, outfielder, and at first base. She was one of the stars on the South Bend Blue Sox championship team in 1952. Through the A@L Civil Rights and Baseball initiative, students from six MPS schools read the biography Joyce Westerman: Baseball Hero and attended an assembly program facilitated by author Bob Kann. In this one-of-a-kind opportunity for students, Kann interviewed Joyce about her experiences in the women's league and students asked questions of this inspirational ninety-year-old former professional baseball player.

The Negro Professional Baseball League

Until Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, African American baseball players were not allowed to play Major League Baseball. From the 1920s into the 1950s, however, they did play professional baseball in the Negro Baseball Leagues. They displayed playing abilities there that demonstrated they could play on even terms with their white counterparts, and this eventually paved the way to a more equitable playing field for all.

In 1953, seventeen-year-old Dennis Biddle became the youngest player of record to play in a Negro League baseball game. As part of the A@L Civil Rights and Baseball project, students met with Dennis Biddle, President of the Yesterday's Negro Professional Baseball Players Foundation, to learn about the history of the game and the role of civil rights in his life on and off the field. Dennis spoke in several Milwaukee Public Schools classrooms telling stories of his playing days and the history of the Negro League. He also loaned A@L some of his baseball memorabilia for their gallery exhibit. A@L Communications Specialist Brianna Seipel described his classroom visits, "There was definitely an intimate enthusiasm around him from the students. He had a great presence, gave fantastic presentations, and was really good with the kids, too."

The experience culminated with a brunch to honor several of the Negro League players, who were in town from around the country for a Brewers game where they were honored for their time as players in the League. Students had opportunities to chat with players about their experiences and learn the importance of their commitment to the League during this tumultuous time in America's history.

The Students

Over several months prior to meeting Joyce Westerman and Dennis Biddle, students learned about the minority influence in baseball. After conducting research, they created original artwork inspired by their studies. The work from the older students, which was guided by local artists and art educators from Cardinal Stritch University, included original drawings, large painted cutouts of Negro League stars, and other works.

The process of producing museum quality pieces was very engaging for the students. Their creations were displayed alongside a traveling memorabilia collection about the Negro League and personal photos provided by Westerman.

Artist educator Gilberto Botello worked with the younger students who studied the history of Latinos in baseball. They created illustrations of different players for the exhibit along with histories of the ballplayers. The goal of the project for all students was for them to learn about and visually express how minorities shaped professional baseball and created opportunities for others to play the game.

Professional Development

Utilizing research and exhibit development skills that they would in turn teach their students, twenty-six teachers collaborated to create an exhibit about the AAGPBL using the Kid Curators museum process. Under the instruction of Linda D'Acquisto, author of *Learning on Display: Student Created Museums That Build Understanding*, teachers spent the summer learning how to design and implement student created museum projects in their classrooms. Their final product, a condensed museum with baseball-related illustrations and quotes, was displayed in a "baseball locker" alongside student work at the Civil Rights & Baseball gallery exhibition at A@L.

Milwaukee Brewers Connection

The Milwaukee Brewers Foundation was one of the funders of the Civil Rights and Baseball project. When they learned about the life size, self-standing cutouts and accompanying biographies of Negro League players students created for the exhibit at the A@L Gallery, the Foundation provided students free tickets to a Brewers game and invited them to display their artwork in one of the stadium stairwells. The students were very excited to see thousands of fans viewing their artwork while streaming in and out of the stadium.





About the Author

Bob Kann grew up in Skokie, Illinois, but it happened so long ago that he remembers nothing of the event.

As a child, he loved sports above all else and could perform a standing back flip by the age of nine. His mother worried that reading nothing but sports books would stunt Bob's intellectual growth, but his older brother assured her that he would eventually read books on other topics (he did). Little did any of them know that he also would write several books including a book about a baseball player and another about an athlete who competed in several sports. Listening to his father's tales about growing up during the Depression, driving at the age of twelve to make deliveries for his father's store, and other stories of the south side of Chicago planted the seeds for Bob's later passion for storytelling.

Bob attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, became a teacher, received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and later a Professor of Education at UW-Parkside and UW-Stevens Point. Shortly after becoming a professor, Bob realized he liked making his students laugh more than he liked teaching them. He recognized that what he wanted to next undertake was simultaneously entertaining children and adults since this seemed limitlessly interesting and creative.

In 1982, Bob became a storyteller, juggler, and magician who began performing for children and families throughout the United States. In 1985, he realized that being a former teacher/professor turned entertainer, he had unique insights into the relationship between entertainment and education. Hence, he began teaching graduate classes and presenting keynotes and workshops for educators and nonprofit organizations on topics related to humor, storytelling, creativity, and motivation. (Coincidentally, A@L CEO Emeritus contracted with Bob to perform at the PumpHouse Regional Arts Center in LaCrosse, WI at the beginning of his career. Bob continued providing great educational programming at various organizations where Sullivan worked and subsequently was one of the first artists to work with Arts @ Large in 2001.)

As a free-lancer for more than thirty years, Bob has developed many interests which have led him to produce storytelling tapes and write books for children, design curriculum for teachers, collect and write historical stories for nonprofit organizations, and apply his research skills as a consultant for social service agencies.

Bob believes it's easier to climb the ladder of success when it's lying flat on the ground. He usually can be found reading his favorite book on levitation. He simply can't put it down.