

New book club enriches participants with knowledge

By Kathi Overstreet
Sentinel-Voice

Located in the heart of the Black community of Las Vegas, the West Las Vegas Arts Center is now offering a book club for all ages.

The Watoto Book Club, led by Sam Smith, owner of the Native Son Book Store and community activist TuWanda Locke, meets every second and fourth Saturday from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. There is no membership fee.

Smith and Locke guide club members through historical subjects in a relaxed atmosphere that promotes reading and stimulates the mind into thought provoking discussions. The duo emphasizes personal enrichment and the rewards of reading by outfitting club members with literature and literary works based on an African-American curriculum.

Marsha Robinson, Arts Center coordinator said, "Sam's background and TuWanda's work with the bookstore and involvement in the community as a volunteer and active parent make them authorities to facilitate the club. By partnering with the bookstore, club members have an opportunity to connect with these role models, learn of new ones and become better thinkers so that in the future they will make better decisions for their lives and the lives of others when they need to."

"The club is open to the public," said Smith. "Our desire is to motivate and enlighten people about our history. We welcome adults to join the club and learn about the Black history you weren't taught in school. This club is a great way for families to come together in a meaningful way that will draw you closer as a family and change your life."

Nirvana Hopkins, 14, is a club member who speaks highly about experiences she's had at Watoto meetings. "There's so much information here. I want to keep learning more about our history."

Smith's fascination with his culture and people began long before he decided to open the bookstore at the corner of "D" Street and Monroe Avenue. As a student at Richmond College now Staten Island College in New York, Smith majored in African-American History and graduated Magna Cum Laude. He retired as a New York City police officer and moved to



Sentinel-Voice photo by Kathi Overstreet

(L to R) Nirvana Hopkins (back), Natice Locke, Elizabeth Sanchez, Nichavelie Smith and Knoelle Locke are part of the Watoto Book Club. TuWanda Locke, right, instructs Watoto.

Las Vegas where he worked for the Clark County Fire Department until he retired as Deputy Fire Marshall.

"Literacy is a big issue in our community. Although the Arts Center is not the traditional classroom setting, as educators we have a responsibility to encourage our youth," Robinson said.

In club meetings, members ranging in age from six to adult take turns reading books aloud and then engaging in conversation about the subject. Older members help younger members pronounce more advanced words which in-turn creates a special bond between members. When necessary, dictionaries and thesauruses are used to assist with definitions, usage and pronunciation.

"Everyone helps each other with the tough words. In the end we all learn," said Locke.

Watoto is an African word meaning "children." It comes from the lexicon of Kiswahili, a non-tribal language spoken by people in the Congo, Southern Sudan, the Comoros Islands, Northern Malagasy Republic and the Persian Gulf.

"We first learned the meaning of 'watoto' from I. M. Nur, an author who visited the Performing & Visual Arts Camp for the signing of his book, 'The Meaning of Blackness, Uncovering the Secrets of Secrets — The Nature and Destiny of a People,' this past June. The watoto were mentioned sev-

eral times in his book — we fell in love with the meaning and the rest its history," said the center's Cultural Leader, Jewel Jeppe.

The Watoto Book Club's first meeting was Saturday, September 11. At that meeting, the Tulsa, Okla. race riot of June 1, 1921 was discussed with Smith at the helm. He chose this subject to help expand the cognition of club members. "This was a very significant event in our history, yet most African-American 'watoto' have little

or no knowledge of this event," he said.

In fact, books used to teach American history in most school systems today still report this event — one of the worst incidents of violence ever upon Black people that has since become known as "a Black holocaust in America" — in a sketchy, inaccurate manner.

"Those who have no record of what their forebearers have accomplished lose the inspiration which comes from the teach-

ing of biography and history," said Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Month who earned a Ph.D. in History from Harvard University.

According to publisher and orator Ron Wallace, a Tulsa native, the riot left some 3,000 African-Americans dead, and more than 600 successful businesses destroyed. Among these were 21 churches, 21 restaurants, 30 grocery stores and two movie theaters, plus a hospital, bank, post office, libraries, schools, law offices, a half dozen private airplanes and a bus system.

Saturday marked the club's second meeting. Locke and club members read about and discussed the life of novelist, folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston.

The exact year of Hurston's birth is not known. Biographical accounts list her birth year between 1891 and 1903. She began her life working as a domestic and later went on to obtain a formal education at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Hurston is best known for her contributions to the Harlem Renaissance and her literary deeds. During her life she wrote several short stories including "John Redding Goes to Sea," "The Stylus" and "Spank"—which caught the attention of Langston Hughes.

In 1930, Hurston and Hughes collaborated on a play "Mule Bone: A Comedy of

Negro Life." However, the two became entangled in a quarrel over who merited credit and the play was never produced.

In 1934, Hurston wrote her first novel, "Jonah's Gourd Vine." New York Times critic Margaret Wallace said it was "the most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has yet been written by a member of the Negro race." In 1942, Hurston wrote her autobiography, "Dust Tracks on a Road."

She engaged in other literary works before her life became entangled in a scandal involving a 10-year-old mentally disabled boy. She was arrested and the charges later dropped.

During the later years of her life, Hurston fell into poverty and returned to work as a domestic. She suffered a stroke in 1959 and died on January 28, 1960 of hypertensive heart disease at the Saint Lucie County Welfare Home in Fort Pierce, Fla.

The Watoto Book Club's next meeting will be Saturday, October 23, from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the West Las Vegas Arts Center, 947 W. Lake Mead Blvd. The group will discuss the book "The Mis-Education of the Negro" written by Dr. Carter G. Woodson.

All are welcome to participate. To learn more about the Watoto Book Club or obtain copies of books discussed by the club, call 647-0101 or 229-4800.

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844 E. Sahara Avenue
Las Vegas, Nevada

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