Quilts in KCK project tell a story of history, pride

BY ALICE THORSON - THE KANSAS CITY STAR
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Well-known Kansas City quilt artist Nedra Bonds appears with some of the quilts created by elementary school children in Kansas City, Kan., in
Nancy Dawson’s one-act play, “Stories from Da Dirt,” was inspired by her great-grandmother Elizabeth Thompson, who walked across the frozen Missouri River to Kansas to escape slavery.

The play always has incorporated quilts in its staging because of the role quilts played in the lives of slaves. So when the Kentucky-based playwright partnered with pre-eminent Kansas City quilt-maker Nedra Bonds to tell the story, it became a chance to showcase art, theater, history and civic pride.

In a project called “If Da Dirt Could Talk,” Bonds directed a yearlong series of workshops where children helped make quilts that portray important citizens of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kan. Then Dawson and a small cast perform the play against a backdrop of the quilts.

The play is making the rounds this weekend, timed with Juneteenth celebrations. It will be performed Saturday at the Juneteenth celebration at Big Eleven Lake and Sunday in Old Quindaro Cemetery, where Dawson’s great-grandmother, along with many other former slaves who migrated to Quindaro, is buried.

The Kansas City, Kan., community has its own role in the project: Quindaro is where both Bonds and Dawson were raised.

Quindaro and freedom
Juneteenth (June 19) celebrates the end of slavery and highlights African-American achievement and potential. The events typically include prayer, inspirational speakers, performances and food.

Quindaro was once an important station on the Underground Railroad. “Nancy’s great-grandmother crossed to freedom at Quindaro,” Bonds said.

“Many people made and sold quilts to fund the Underground Railroad,” she said. “And in Quindaro, people would hang cloths on trees to tell people hiding in caves by the river when it was safe to come out.”

The quilts also could have been used for more.

“There’s a national debate about how slaves knew where to go,” Bonds said. One theory, advanced in the book “Hidden in Plain View” is that quilts encoded directions for safe travel in familiar patterns like the Wagon Wheel and Drunkard’s Path, she said. “The images came together to tell stories.”

The Old Quindaro Cemetery brought the two women together. They met in 1983 at an organizing meeting to stop Browning Ferris Industries from turning the cemetery into a landfill.

“If Da Dirt Could Talk” evolved out of a 2012 exhibit celebrating the 40th anniversary of the University of Missouri-Kansas City Women’s Center. The show offered a selection of Bonds’ textile works, including the Women’s Equity Quilt created under her direction.

Dawson attended the opening, Bonds said. So did Julia Cole, Rocket Grants program coordinator for the Charlotte Street Foundation, who invited Bonds to put

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together a proposal for the community, which led to a $5,250 Rocket Grant for their project.

Funded by the Andy Warhol Foundation and administered locally by the Charlotte Street Foundation and KU’s Spencer Museum of Art, Rocket Grants support innovative projects geared to audiences outside traditional galleries and museums.

It was a perfect fit.

“If Da Dirt Could Talk’ fulfills the intentions of the Rocket Grants program beautifully by sensitively choosing nontraditional venues that would not only engage new kinds of audiences, but also deepen the meaning of the work itself,” Cole said.

Quilts of heroes

This is the first time, Bonds said, that Dawson’s “Stories From Da Dirt” included locally made quilts.

There are eight of them, created in Bonds’ workshops by third- and fifth-graders at Quindaro Elementary and at Stony Point South Elementary.

Bonds introduced the children to dozens of illustrious Wyandotte County natives and residents, including actor Ed Asner; Olympic sprinter Maurice Greene; Boston Daniels, the first African-American police chief of Kansas City, Kan.; and the intriguingly named Potato King of the World.

That was Junius George Groves, a former slave who made a fortune farming and selling potatoes. Groves also sold small tracts of land to his African-American neighbors and was the founder of Grove Center near Edwardsville.
“The idea was to get them to think about being a hero in your community,” Bonds said.

She provided the fifth-graders with a book of 50 local heroes, but she also let the children choose. A favorite hero is contemporary musician and composer Janelle Monae, subject of a quilt produced from drawings created by third-graders at Quindaro Elementary.

One of the workshop sessions included a visit from Charlotte O’Neal, a former Black Panther. O’Neal has spent the past 40 years in Tanzania, where she and her husband ex-Panther, Pete O’Neal, founded the United African Alliance Community Center.

“She came and spent several hours with children and played traditional instruments,” Bonds said.

The Wyandotte County heroes quilts are compilations of the portraits the children created on paper. Bonds translated them to fabric by computer and stitched the fabric versions of the drawings onto colorful patterned background fabrics.

Fifth-graders at Stony Point created a charming quilt that incorporates a portrait bust of Groves with potatoes rising above each shoulder. Another square features a portrait of Nancy Quindaro Brown Guthrie, a Wyandot Indian and wife of Quindaro founder Abelard Guthrie, who named the town for her.

In her workshops, Bonds stressed the Wyandot support for the abolitionist cause and the Underground Railroad, as well as the important role of women in the Wyandot Nation.

A quilt made by fifth-graders features Chief Janith
English of the Wyandot Nation. English signed the 1998 peace treaty with the Wyandotte Tribe of Oklahoma preserving the Huron Cemetery in Kansas City, Kan.

The Oklahoma group had legal control of the cemetery and wanted to develop it, but the Kansas Wyandot did not want the area disturbed because many of their ancestors are buried there. The quilt includes a drawing of the treaty and “Thank you Janith English” across the top.

Bonds first came to prominence as a quilt-maker with her Quindaro Quilt, designed to call attention to the area’s history at the time Browning-Ferris planned a landfill. She has since served on the Kansas Arts Commission and as a delegate to the United Nations’ Conference on Environment and Development.

In addition to workshops and projects in the Kansas City area, Bonds has taught quilting in Nairobi, Kenya; Arusha, Tanzania; and Port au Prince in Haiti. She is grateful for the way her latest project has turned out.

“I’ve spent 60 years making quilts,” she said. “Kids had to be busy when we were growing up. We didn’t have ‘the thumb thing’ (immersion in electronic devices).

“One benefit that’s come out of this project is that some of the children recognize their artistic abilities,” she said. “I’m trying to get them involved in classes at the Nelson-Atkins. They have some scholarships.”

Now that “If Da Dirt Could Talk” is complete, Bonds is anticipating the fall unveiling at Arrowhead Stadium of her 6-by-6-foot quilt commissioned by the Kansas City Chiefs Art Program. The theme is women creating quilts for the Underground Railroad. Bonds also is
conceptualizing a project based on recent events.

“I’m interested in artists’ responses to the shootings at the Jewish Community Center,” she said. “I think the community of artists needs to make a statement about what happened.”

To reach Alice Thorson, call 816-234-4763 or send email to athorson@kcstar.com.

ONSTAGE

“Stories From Da Dirt” will be performed by a cast of six actors at 12:30 p.m. Saturday for the Juneteenth Celebration, Big Eleven Lake, 5033 State Ave., Kansas City, Kan., and at 2 p.m. Sunday in the Old Quindaro Cemetery, 3432 N. 29th St., Kansas City, Kan. Admission is free. Lawn chairs and walking shoes are recommended for both events.