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**Dr. Patrick Harrigan**  
Superintendent of Schools



February 2021

Dear Community Members,

The tragic events of this past year have laid bare the real need for more action on social justice and racial equity in our country. As we enter February and Black History Month, it is important to recognize that we can do more, and have to do more. While we aspire to have a curriculum in Half Hollow Hills throughout the entire academic year that is inclusive of the history and contributions of all groups, Black History Month is an important time that allows us to pause, reflect and highlight the many important contributions of African Americans in our world. We ask that as we begin Black History Month you join us in recognizing and honoring Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, important and must-know figures in black history, and invite you to learn along with our students and read the words of Kwame Alexander.

In 2008, award-winning author Kwame Alexander wrote the poem *The Undefeated* as a tribute to the birth of his second daughter and the election of Barack Obama as the first African American president of the United States ([please click this link to watch a video of Alexander reading his poem](#)). Over ten years later, the poem was published as a children's book with illustrations by Kadir Nelson, and in 2020 won the Caldecott Medal. *The Undefeated* remembers famous and overlooked figures from black history, while also bringing attention to the endurance and spirit of those living now. It is a mentor text in our 5th grade classrooms, and this book, along with others by Alexander, are on the shelves in many classrooms across the district. In 2019, our middle school districtwide book club featured a read-along of the book, "The Crossover" by Alexander. The words of *The Undefeated* are accompanied by oil paintings, including the images of important and must-know figures in black history. One of the stanzas from the poem follows (that is accompanied in his published work by the images of Jack Johnson, Romare Bearden, Zora Neale Hurston, Jacob Lawrence, Henry Ossawa Tanner, Augusta Savage, Phillis Wheatley, Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglas.)

"This is for the unflappable.  
The sophisticated ones  
who box adversity  
and tackle vision  
who shine  
their light for the world to see  
and don't stop  
'til the break of dawn."

Today, we shine a light on Zora Neale Hurston, a writer, anthropologist and folklorist who dedicated herself to promoting and studying black culture and was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance. She is credited with creating characters that helped transform opinions and challenge stereotypes. She obtained a degree in Anthropology from Barnard College and aspired to be, in her own words, "the authority on Afro-American folklore."

In 1936, Hurston traveled to Haiti to study the culture and while there began writing the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Although the novel, about a strong, independent and proud black woman is highly acclaimed today, when it was published in 1937 it received a great deal of criticism and in her lifetime few copies of the book sold. She went on to write an autobiography and several plays, but for all that she accomplished, Hurston struggled financially and personally. In 1960, she died poor and alone and was buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida.

Thirteen years later, and nine years before she would go on to win a Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *The Color Purple*, author Alice Walker traveled to Florida. Having read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* a few years after Hurston's death, she felt compelled to honor the woman whom she viewed as a preserver of Southern black culture. Walker located Hurston's unmarked grave and a headstone was placed there reading "Genius of the South." Walker's essay titled "Looking for Zora," published in 1975 in Ms. Magazine, was a further way for her to honor Hurston and brought about renewed interest in Hurston. New editions of her long-out-of-print novels and other writings were subsequently published and Hurston is now recognized as one of the pre-eminent writers of the twentieth century. With the posthumous publication of her very first book, *Barracoon* in 2018, Hurston has found a way to connect to a whole new generation of readers.

Completed in 1931, *Barracoon* tells the true story of Cudjo Lewis, who was believed to be the last living person captured in Africa and brought to America on a slave ship. Hurston traveled to Alabama in 1927 to interview Lewis who shared his recollections of being abducted at the age of nineteen from West Africa, his transport aboard the Clotilda (the last known ship to bring slaves to the U.S.) and then his sale to slavers in Alabama. In 1931, Hurston could find no one willing to publish it, largely because she refused to change Lewis' heavily accented dialect to make the text "more readable." In 2016, Hurston's grandniece, Lois Hurston Gaston, announced that the book would finally be published in its original form and shared that its release was "especially timely given that our country is continuing to focus on our racial divide and the consequences of slavery." *Barracoon* was published on May 8, 2018, with Alice Walker writing about Zora Neale Hurston in the foreword, "She wanted us to hear his [Cudjo Lewis] voice and she kept herself out of it as much as possible. She knew it was important for us to hear from him."

*The Undeclared* was not published until the following spring, but the afterword of the book was written three days after *Barracoon* was made available to the public, and in it Kwame Alexander echoes this need to make sure we are listening and learning when he explains why he wrote *The Undeclared*. "I wanted to establish from the very beginning that much of what I am talking about in the poem, so much of American history, has been forgotten, left out of textbooks, and that to truly know who we are as a country, we have to accept and embrace all of our woes and wonders."

Sincerely,



Dr. Patrick Harrigan  
Superintendent



Lorraine Lupinskie-Huvane  
Social Studies Director