Workshop takes students back to Shakespearean England

All’s well that ends well for Ashland Middle School eighth-grade students who entered the world of William Shakespeare during a class workshop on Thursday.

Jeri Millhouse, an English teacher at AMS, started the annual Shakespeare workshop four years ago as a means to introduce junior high students to the Bard before they go on to high school.

“My main goal is that they won’t fear Shakespeare,” Millhouse said. “When they come and do this for a day, they realize, ‘I can read this, I can understand this.’”

About 70 Advanced English students split into stations at First Christian Church, where they learned about Shakespeare’s life, his works, acting onstage and “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.”

Spoken Images — a reading troupe composed of Dave Kowalka, Keith and Wendy Guion and Mary Ann Calhoun — assisted the students in breaking down individual scenes from the play.

“We went through the play actually digging into it, trying to figure out what the words actually meant,” said Lukah Will, a student. “We got up and we performed and tried to actually do the motions and get into it a little bit.”

Will played the role of Theseus, the duke of Athens in the play. After breaking down individual scenes, the students came together to perform in front of their peers.
The workshop met several Common Core state standards, according to Millhouse, and gave students the opportunity to perform in front of their classmates while pushing themselves outside their comfort zone.

Four high school students also attended the workshop who were part of the inaugural workshop four years ago.

“You’re not sitting in a classroom having someone talk at you,” said Luke Blackley, a junior at Ashland High School. “To give them an opportunity to try some stuff, to perform, I think that that’s really, really important.”

Local performer and artist Sue Amstutz took charge of the improv station where she instructed students on how to get into a certain emotion during a performance.

Amstutz instructed students to use “emotional recall” to “draw on” emotions felt during previous experiences.

“The more specific you can be about the emotion and why you’re feeling that way, the better you can portray that emotion (onstage),” she said.

Millhouse applied for grants to fund the workshop when she decided she wanted to take the program off campus this year.

The Ashland County Community Foundation provided $522 through the Teacher’s Mini Grant that went toward the cost of the workshop, costumes and tickets for Millhouse’s English classes to attend “Little Women” at Ashland University.

Other community organizations also pitched an effort to support the Shakespeare workshop. First Christian Church and the Ashland City Schools Parent Teacher Organization provided snacks and supplies for each station during the workshop.

“This church is fabulous,” Millhouse said. “The way the local churches support our youth is wonderful, but this church in particular has been so generous because of the proximity.” It sits across King Road from the school campus.

“My advanced kids need access to above-grade-level curriculum ... I’m always looking for ways to enrich those advanced students and push them a little harder,” she said.

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