



TOM WADDILL/THE HUNTSVILLE ITEM

Huntsville dancer Jarell Rochelle performs a narrative dance during Saturday's "Honoring Black History" program at the Wynne Home Arts Center. Before Rochelle danced, his wife, Madeline, spoke from the heart about her daily experiences living in a loving interracial marriage.

## An important history lesson

Community activist, college professor, artists, dancers, poet and singer get together for special Black History Month program at Wynne Home

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Wet weather couldn't keep some Huntsville residents from attending the first of two special events at the Wynne Home Arts Center in honor of Black History Month on Saturday.

The afternoon event was hosted by the Wynne Home in partnership with the Walker County Genealogical Society and featured special performances and presentations from local artists, activists and more.

Each presentation, ranging from dance to song and spoken-word poetry, centered around the importance of Black History Month, remembering and honoring the meaning behind black history and what that means in today's society.

"I think the event was good. I enjoyed it very much myself, and I hope everyone did because it was a good variety of both presenters and the art that is here and the exhibit," said Linda Pease, the City of Huntsville's cultural services coordinator. "It was really a lovely time, I think, in which people were able to give expression in a good way to a lot of ideas about how people



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Huntsville's Richard Watkins provides some background information to kick off Saturday's "Honoring Black History" program at the Wynne Home Arts Center. A history buff, Watkins talked about his family's roots that run deep in Walker County. He also reminded folks why it's so important to study black history.

can work together and what things work.

"I was very happy about it and I was very pleased the turnout," Pease added. "Even though the weather was rainy, I think it was a nice crowd."

Huntsville Mayor Andy Brauninger opened the ceremony by reading a special proclamation to guests, declaring February as

Black History Month in Huntsville.

Longtime Huntsville resident and activist Richard Watkins gave a brief local overview of black history in Huntsville and Walker County.

"This is a very unique community. Slavery was a horrible thing, but there was a lot of isolated situations



# HISTORY

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that were quite unique in its own right and my family falls into that category," Watkins said. "I have to take my hat off to (the Walker County Genealogical Society) because you guys have really done some wonderful things to bring into the forefront contributions and situations that existed in our community that people never knew about. ...

"If you have a chance, look at the 'Pathfinder' book that is displayed because that will give you an example of what this community produced in the black community over a period of years. We have nationally renowned opera singers, people who have become successful business owners and government workers. ... This community was very unique."

Kyle Ainsworth, special collections librarian at Stephen F. Austin State University and manager of the Texas Runaway Slave Project, gave an informative presentation over how runaway slave advertisements have been crucial in learning more about the history of slavery in Texas.

"While the words of the master describing are degrading, racist and visceral, runaway slave advertisements are unintended records of resistance in the pursuit of freedom," Ainsworth said. "We must remember these people and remember slavery in Texas, which while 150 years gone, is still so important to the identity and history of the state."

Local dance artist Jarell Rochelle performed a narrative dance piece to chronicle his experience growing up and living in today's society as an African-American male. Before performing his piece, his wife, Madeline Rochelle, read an essay she wrote explaining her perspective of the world through the lens of being a white woman in an interracial marriage and raising a child in today's culture climate.

"As a white woman who has been blessed with a family who daily experiences being a black American, I have had the opportunity to gain an understanding into what life looks like through that lens," Madeline Rochelle said. "As my family and I are



PHOTOS BY TOM WADDILL/THE HUNTSVILLE ITEM  
A diverse crowd listens as Kyle Ainsworth, a special collections librarian at Stephen F. Austin State University, talks about his Texas Runaway Slave Project during a Black History Month program at the Wynne Home Arts Center in Huntsville on Saturday. Ainsworth has spent several years researching runaway slaves in Texas. More than 2,200 runaway slaves in Texas have been identified through different kinds of records.



James Rochelle, left, prefaces a poem he delivered Saturday with facts about the number of black men who are incarcerated in the United States. He compared that with the number of black men who are pursuing a college education. Rochelle's poem was about black fathers in America and the critical roles they played in the lives of their children.

and a performance from local self-taught artist Semone Robinson.

The Wynne Home Arts Center will be hosting another special program in honor of Black History Month next Saturday, beginning at 4 p.m. The event is open to the community and geared toward both parents and children, and will feature a presentation from Naomi Carrier from the Texas Center for African American Living History.

Carrier will be conducting a re-enactment of an Underground Railroad story titled "Fugitives of Passion." That will be followed by a question-and-answer session. Carrier will also be doing a presentation about quilts used by slaves escaping through the Underground Railroad as a communication system.

The quilts are currently on display inside the Wynne Home Arts Center. For more information about next weekend's event, visit [www.thewynnehome.com](http://www.thewynnehome.com).

out in public, this is one of the first things I've noticed. I was suddenly aware of those 'stop and stares.' When I was pregnant, I began dreaming about my daughter and walking down aisles in the stores and looking at dolls and realizing that none may look like her or they would be few and far between.

"I realized I was gaining ac-

cess to look behind the veil of white privilege into a life of someone who does not daily benefit from being a white American. On one hand, I was shocked because I thought, 'Don't we live in a land that promotes freedom and equality and equal representation' like I had always been told.

"On the other hand, I ques-

tioned myself as to why I had never noticed the truth of what had been right in front of me all along. There's so much to be said about empathy and understanding that is very lacking without the desire to understand life in another person's shoes."

Closing the ceremony was a special spoken-word poetry reading from James Rochelle