

OF Spring 2016

NEWS



On April 19, our students and our community will have an exceptional opportunity to explore one of the pivotal events that sparked the American Civil Rights Movement. The Okemos Education Foundation will present **The Legacy of Emmett Till: Understanding History from Four Perspectives**, a panel discussion on the 1955 kidnapping and brutal murder of 14 year old Emmett Till. This free event, held on April 19, 2016 at 7:00 p.m. in the Okemos High School auditorium, will feature four speakers with unique viewpoints on this important historical event.

Joining us in Okemos will be Emmett Till's cousin, Wheeler Parker Jr., who was with him in Mississippi in August 1955. Mr. Parker will share his own account of that fateful day. Also speaking during this living history event will be author and historian, Dr. Chris Crowe. Crowe has authored two books on the topic and will share his experience researching the case. In 2004 the United State Department of Justice re-opened the case. FBI agent Dale Killinger will participate via video feed and share his experience interviewing key witnesses and exhuming Emmett's body. Lastly, Dr. Tamara Butler, English and African



## THE LEGACY OF EMMETT TILL:

*Understanding History from Four Perspectives*

American Studies professor at Michigan State University, will speak on the importance of keeping Emmett's story alive today. The Legacy of Emmett Till: Understanding History from Four Perspectives provides a unique opportunity to learn about this important historical event from different viewpoints

and to develop a deeper understanding of how our history continues to influence our lives today. The discussion will be presented to all high school students during the school day on April 19 and again at 7:00 p.m. for the community. All are welcome at the 7:00 p.m. presentation. Thanks to the support of the OEF's individual and business sponsors, there will be no admission fee for this event.

This event was inspired by OHS English Teacher Jane Phillips who saw a similar discussion in 2014 during a week-long workshop sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This past fall, Phillips applied for an OEF grant to help cover the costs of bringing these panelists to Okemos High School so that our students could benefit from the same moving experience. The Okemos Education Foundation board decided to fund the entire project and to add an evening presentation so that the wider community could also benefit. "We saw an amazing educational opportunity, both for our high school students and for our community, to experience history in a different way. This event is exactly the type of event that an education foundation should support, and the Okemos Education Foundation is proud to do so," says OEF Chair Martha Hentz. The discussion also supports the district's on-going efforts to create a culturally competent environment for students, families and staff.

Okemos Superintendent Catherine Ash notes, "This event provides our students and our community with an opportunity to extend the equity and inclusion work that we are doing as a district and take it to a deeper level."

We invite you to join us at 7:00 p.m. on April 19th to experience this rare opportunity to meet those directly involved in our history and to take time to reflect on how the legacy of Emmett Till continues to resonant today.

### **The Legacy of Emmett Till:**

#### **Understanding History from Four Perspectives**

**Tuesday, April 19, 2016**

**7:00 p.m.**

#### **Okemos High School**

This is a free community event and all are welcome. The OEF is grateful to the many business and individual sponsors whose generosity allows the OEF to host this important event. Donations of any amount are very welcome!

**[www.oefsite.org](http://www.oefsite.org)**

### **MEET EMMETT TILL**



**Emmett Till** was a 14 year old African American boy who traveled from Chicago in August 1955 to visit his cousins in rural Mississippi. Emmett's body, badly beaten and shot, was pulled from the Tallahatchie River three days after he was dragged from his great uncle's home for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Emmett's mother made the courageous decision to bring his body back to Chicago, place him in an open casket and allow the body to be photographed. The shocking photos, coupled with the swift acquittal of the murderers, moved many to action. This incident is widely believed to be the spark that ignited the American civil rights movement. It has also been argued that it served as the basis for the Tom Robinson trial in Harper Lee's *"To Kill a Mockingbird."*

Read more about Emmett Till at **[www.oefsite.org](http://www.oefsite.org)**.

PANELISTS



**Wheeler Parker, Jr.,** Emmett Till’s cousin, was with Emmett in Mississippi in August 1955. Wheeler will share his story of Emmett’s encounter with Carolyn Bryant in the Bryant’s store and of Emmett’s kidnapping.



**Dr. Chris Crowe,** author, historian, and Brigham Young University professor, has written two books about the Emmett Till case. He will share his extensive knowledge about both the case and the Civil Rights Movement.



**Dale Killinger,** agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, will share the forensic evidence that he collected during the 2004 re-opening of the case (presented via recorded video).



**Dr. Tamara Butler,** Assistant Professor of English and African American & African Studies at Michigan State University, will share parallel cases in the news and will offer insight into how Emmett’s case remains relevant today.



**Kristina Marshall, JD,** Professor of Social Sciences at Baker College of Owosso, will serve as the discussion’s moderator and will field questions from the audience.

**Okemos Students Talk With FBI Agent About Emmett Till**

FBI Agent **Dale Killinger** fielded questions from Okemos High School students about his role in reopening the Emmett Till case in 2004. SSA Killinger shared his experience with interviewing family members, former jurors, and exhuming and examining Till’s body.

Ninth grader Nkiyasi Helms said, “It was very interesting to hear the facts about the case, but it was the personal stories about Emmett’s family that really got to me.” Sophomore Nahson Kellum also commented that SSA (Supervisory Special Agent) Killinger “furthered my knowledge about the facts surrounding the case, but he also made me realize that racism is still present in today’s society.” Excerpts from SSA Killinger’s remarks will be shared during the April 19th Living History event.

**L**EGOs, the colorful plastic building bricks that kids assemble into amazing masterpieces, can be found in most homes of elementary-aged children. Now LEGOs are being used in one Okemos

really fun part starts: students storyboard their ideas by physically building the story's action scene using the provided LEGO pieces. This part of the process can be done in small groups and collaboration is

# LEGO STORYSTARTERS



classroom to help students create imaginative stories and learn about the writing process through an innovative program called LEGO StoryStarters.

Bennett Woods 3rd grade teacher Ivy Schmidt received an OEF grant to purchase the LEGO StoryStarters classroom kit, which includes sets of LEGO pieces, a curriculum guide that meets Common Core English Language Arts standards, and software to allow students to digitally publish their work. The kit provides teachers with many options to inspire and develop strong writers. Some lessons allow students to work in groups, creating a story with various options for writing a solution, while other lessons offer the beginning of a story line and students are instructed to choose a scenario, develop the plot and add their own details. After that, the

encouraged to create a robust and engaging scene. Once built, students write what is happening in their LEGO scene, act it out, edit and improve their stories, and ultimately publish their work using the program's software. Students spend multiple days working through the full program, learning about the different elements of a well-composed story and creating an original tale.

Mrs. Schmidt appreciates how the LEGO StoryStarters program is able to offer her students an intriguing way to initiate a good story. "I like how their faces light up when they learn that they can

create with their hands before putting it all together into a more abstract form on the paper. With StoryStarters, students never tell me, “I don’t know what to write,” which was a common problem before we had this program.” StoryStarters is also able to capture and hold the interest of young writers. OEF trustee Martha Hentz observed the storyboarding process in Ivy’s classroom. “I was amazed at the level of concentration in the room. Every student was engaged and focused on their individual projects. And they were so proud of what they had created.”



This hands-on program encourages student collaboration, integrates technology into the classroom, and inspires students to create imaginative stories. Thank you, OEF donors, for allowing us to provide innovative classroom materials like LEGO StoryStarters. And, thank you to Okemos teachers like Ivy Schmidt for bringing these materials to our students.

*Nathan M. “I really liked building my story with LEGOs instead of just drawing a picture about it on paper. I wish we could write stories this way all the time.”*

**Learn more about the grants and programs funded by the OEF: [www.oefsite.org/grants](http://www.oefsite.org/grants)**

## 2016 OEF Award Nominations Accepted Now!

The Okemos Education Foundation bestows several annual awards to recognize excellence in our district. We honor educators, staff members, volunteers, and distinguished alumni. Do you know someone deserving of special recognition? Read about the award criteria and nomination process on our website ([www.oefsite.org](http://www.oefsite.org)). But don’t delay: **Nomination packets must be received by June 10, 2016.** Thank you for helping the OEF recognize excellence in Okemos!

## Are you an OEF Partner in Education?

The Okemos Education Foundation relies on the generous support of its donors to fulfill its mission of “**Recognizing Excellence and Promoting Innovation in Okemos Public Schools.**” Our donors are Okemos parents, grandparents, alumni, district staff, business owners, and community members who join together to fill the gaps left by dwindling state education budgets and provide funding for the innovative equipment and programs that set Okemos schools apart. **Please support the OEF by donating today.** Use the form on the back page of this newsletter or donate online at [www.oefsite.org](http://www.oefsite.org). Thank you!



# The Journey Towards Cultural Competence Continues!

Superintendent's Message: **Dr. Catherine J. Ash**

**A**s a district, we have continued our “intentional and focused” journey towards cultural competence, inclusion and ensuring a responsive school environment for our students, families and staff. Clearly, this requires all members of our diverse community to engage in the conversation, share perspectives and commit to making a difference for ALL of our students.

In January, our community was invited to a conversation with the Okemos Public Schools' Board of Education. The purpose of this special meeting was to engage in two-way communication on the topic of becoming a more culturally inclusive school district. As defined by President Melanie Lynn, “An inclusive environment is one in which people of ALL cultural orientations can freely express who they are, their own opinions and points of view; fully participate in teaching, learning, work and social activities; and feel safe from intentional and unintentional mistreatment, harassment or unfair criticism.” We had over 100 participants (parents/guardians, staff, students and community members), share their diverse perspectives and experiences, adding value and informing OUR work.

First and foremost, as individuals and as a collective, we must align our behaviors with our equity statement: “We respect, value, honor and celebrate the rich dimensions of diversity within our community, including but not limited to: biological sex, disability, ethnicity, family status, gender identity/expression, language, national origin, race, religion, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status.” Further, we will “promote equity and eliminate barriers” to learning in a manner that recognizes, affirms and values the worth of each person in our district and community. As a school community we have identified four areas of focus:

- *Authentic Selves and Relationships*
- *Cultural Competence*
- *Instruction/Curriculum/Assessments*
- *Policies/Practices/Procedures*

For each of these areas of focus, we will be developing specific goals, identifying and implementing strategies, identifying resources and establishing timelines to promote accountability and ensure impactful outcomes.\*

This journey towards cultural competence isn't “one more thing to do!” Instead, it is a lens through which to view all of our work, informing our actions and interactions. Cultural competence is about:

- *Promoting a heightened level of self-awareness*
- *Understanding how our beliefs and biases can intentionally and unintentionally affect interactions with students and adults*
- *Increasing our knowledge of culture and each other*
- *Understanding how culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways*
- *Recognizing that people (children and adults) differ and are at risk for having their actions misperceived and judged*
- *Realizing that “our” cultural views are not absolute and acknowledging that not everyone experiences “the world” in the same way*
- *Enhancing our skills*

As we engage in these courageous and often emotion laden conversations, we are committed to open and honest communication, being inclusive of all voices, allowing ourselves to experience “discomfort”, genuinely listening and seeking to understand, assuming good intentions and practicing forgiveness. Our culture of collaboration and “together” will certainly serve us well, as we consciously engage in this transformative work for the benefit of ALL students. As Okemos continues to pursue excellence in a collaborative environment, I invite and encourage you to actively participate in the District's journey to cultural competence and inclusiveness.

*\*The Equity Plan has been finalized. The document can be viewed on the Okemos Public School's website. The Board of Education adopted the Equity Plan on March 28, 2016. We will continue to engage the school community in the conversation as we develop an “operational plan,” detailing specific strategies, resources and timelines to accomplish our goals.*

# 2015 OEF Awards Banquet

The Okemos Education Foundation honored 13 people on November 19, 2015 at the annual OEF Awards Banquet, held this year at MSU's Kellogg Center.

Banquet guests were treated to inspiring words from our keynote speaker, retired Okemos music teacher Deb Borton-McDonough, and to several choral selections from Cornell 4th grade students, led by Cornell Music Teacher Eric Morrison. There was original artwork on each table, compliments of Bennett Woods Elementary students and Art Teacher Jennifer Baker. WKAR's Mark Bashore donated his talents as our emcee and Okemos' Matt Ottinger created memorable video clips about each of the award recipients. It was quite a night of Okemos pride!

The **2016 OEF Awards Banquet** will be held on **Thursday, November 17**. All are welcome at this celebration of educational excellence in the Okemos Public School District. **Tickets will go on sale October 1.**



Banquet Keynote Speaker  
Deb Borton-McDonough



Cornell 4th grade chorus, led by Eric Morrison



**Congratulations to the 2015 OEF Award recipients.**

**Back row:** Amy Petersburg, Matthew Ethington, Matt Ottinger, Ryan Lewis, Drew Sartorius, Errin Chapman, Ashley Andersen.

**Front row:** Tammy Deppong, Kris Schoen, Alison Evenson, Kara Dokter, Kathy Shore, Kathy Nicholas



Original artwork created by Bennett Woods students

## We appreciate the businesses and individuals who sponsored the 2015 OEF Awards Banquet!

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**Our donor list is always available on our website at [www.oefsite.org](http://www.oefsite.org). Make a donation today and we'll add your name right away.**

# Alumni | 50th Reunion Celebration

## OKEMOS CLASS OF 1965 DONATES GENEROUSLY TO THE OEF



**G**raduates of the Okemos Class of 1965 held their 50th reunion October 9-11, 2015. Seventy-eight (of the 141 total) graduates attended at least one of the many events comprising the fun weekend of memories and reconnecting with classmates. Festivities included a dinner at MSU's University Club with guest John Bjorkquist, OHS biology teacher and cross country coach, tours of both the "old" high school (Chippewa) and the "new" high school (the current building), a riverboat dinner/dance and cruise, and a special brunch at MSU's Brody International Cafe. The group even took a school bus tour through various Okemos neighborhoods, pointing out classmates' former homes. During their tour of Chippewa, the group visited the auditorium, a special place to this particular class. Rod Ellis remembers, "Our class was primarily responsible for starting musicals at the high school with Bye-Bye Birdie in 1964." Current Chippewa student Olivia Terry treated the group to several songs from the recent Chippewa performance of Annie, Jr. It was a weekend of great Okemos memories!

The Class of 1965 made the generous decision to gift part of their remaining reunion funds to the Okemos

Education Foundation, in support of musical drama projects at both Chippewa and Okemos High School. They also donated a portable piece of professional sound equipment to Chippewa's Choir Department. Thank you, Okemos Class of 1965!

**Do you know an Okemos grad who has an upcoming reunion? Let us help!**

**Rod Ellis**, Class of 1965 and OEF Trustee, would like to connect with other Okemos graduates to help them plan their reunion celebrations. Rod is eager to share the outline of the 1965 reunion, most of which he "borrowed" from Geri Kalush, planner of the reunion for the Class of 1964. Communication was made easier thanks to the hard work of Bob Bratzler, who established an innovative website. Rod would like future classes to benefit from the work already done by these "reunion masters." Let the OEF help your class experience the same rekindled friendships and fun times recollecting warm memories of your days in Okemos Public Schools. You can contact Rod at [alumni@oefsite.org](mailto:alumni@oefsite.org).

# Meet the New Trustees



**Rod Ellis** is the retired CEO of Luccasse, Ellis, Inc. After a career in the financial services field, Rod is focusing on volunteer work and has been a member of several non-profit boards. A member of the Okemos Class of 1965, he was one of the organizers of the 50th reunion of his class. Rod has two grandchildren in Okemos schools.



**Josh Hundt** is the Director of Business Incentives and Business Project Management with the Michigan Economic Development Corporation in Lansing. He and his wife, both 2002 Okemos graduates, recently moved back to Okemos so that their three young sons could benefit from an Okemos education.



**David Shorter** brings over 20 years of non-profit management experience to the OEF, having been involved in various types of organizations around the United States. Most recently he was the Executive Director of the Steam Railroading Institute in Owosso. Mr. Shorter has two children in Okemos schools.

Learn more about the new OEF trustees at [www.oefsite.org](http://www.oefsite.org) under "About OEF."

## Applications are now being accepted for the 2016-17 OEF Board of Trustees

The Okemos Education Foundation is governed by an all-volunteer board of trustees, people who are passionate about Okemos Public Schools and who have time and experience to share in support of the OEF. Browse the board information on our website (under the "About" tab) for more information and to download an application.



[www.oefsite.org](http://www.oefsite.org)

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### Join the OEF Board

We'd love to have you! We need the creativity and energy that come from new personalities and ideas. See our website under "About OEF" for more information.



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