St. Stephen’s youths learn about blacks’ contributions to military

By Monica Scott
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Crispus Attucks, black patriot and former slave, was the first American to die in the Revolutionary War. But his name is often overlooked or even unknown.

For Black History Month, St. Stephen’s School students spent last Thursday at the Crispus Attucks American Legion Post 59, learning about blacks in the military and their contributions in American wars.

The post, at 243 Commerce St. in downtown Grand Rapids, was established in 1837. "It is important that they see the contributions blacks have toward the development of this country," said Floyd W. Miles, post historian and retired Air Force Tech sergeant. "Beyond arts and athletics, great military leaders, scientists, inventors and others have added to this culture."

Miles showed the 50 fourth-through-eighth-graders a wall of photos dedicated to active-duty black admirals and generals while speaking about the role blacks have played in the resolution of U.S. conflicts.

Retired Col. Faithe Mack, one of the former Tuskegee Airmen based in Tuskegee, Ala., showed a film on the famous black World War II flying unit, as well as footage of a black tank unit rescuing Jews from a concentration camp.

"The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black aviation unit in the military and their record during wartime led to the integration of the military in 1949," Mack said.

Mack said establishment of the unit was an experiment that many said would fail.

"I have never learned about any black soldiers fighting in wars, like the Tuskegee Airmen, from our history books," Christina Barnes, 14, said. "I think that more about the contributions of blacks should be in our curriculum — because it is a part of history and everybody should learn it."

Barnes said that other than slavery, black Americans are not often covered in history books and in fact she has heard a lot of the information for the first time.

Mary Beth Hendricks, president of the Home and School Association, and a friend of Mack, suggested the visit as part of the Black History Month celebration.

St. Stephen’s School, at 750 Gladstone St. SE, has approximately 180 students, preschool through eighth grade. Nearly half the students are minorities.