

EDUCATION

Monmouth Day Care Center Hosts Acclaimed Children's Author



COURTESY MDCC

One of the young readers of "Rice & Rocks" got a chance to meet its author, Sandra L. Richards, when she visited Monmouth Day Care Center in Red Bank Jan. 27. The book deals with family traditions and cultural diversity.

RED BANK - Don't worry. The 4- and 5-year-old students at Monmouth Day Care Center (MDCC) didn't actually eat the rice and rocks they crafted in preparation for a visit from children's book author Sandra L. Richards.

Richards came to the center Jan. 27 to read her debut picture book "Rice & Rocks," illustrated by Megan Kayleigh Sullivan, which celebrates culture and diversity. The book was a finalist in the 2016 USA Best Book Awards and has been voted a Top 100

Recommended Children's book by the African American Literature Book Club.

The book follows Giovanni, a young boy embarrassed by the traditional Jamaican dish of rice and beans - which he calls "rice and rocks" - his grandmother is preparing for Sunday dinner with his friends. Giovanni worries his friends will think the food is weird. But his favorite aunt and his pet parrot take him on a magical journey across the globe, visiting places where people eat "rice and rocks." The story celebrates the varied traditions of every culture while also highlighting the delicious similarities that connect us.

According to the author's website, Richards is an American-born daughter of Jamaican immigrant parents, and "hopes the book will serve as an educational resource for families seeking to teach their children the value of their heritage and the importance of cultural diversity."

MDCC partnered with Laraine Gaunt, an MDCC board member and the creator and director of "It's OK to Be Different," a program that teaches respect for individual differences, to develop an age-appropriate lesson for the students. Gaunt's lesson incorpo-

rated the message of diversity, along with the importance of family traditions, and the decorating of actual rocks. Students presented their completed craft to Richards during the visit.

At the event, Richards announced she will be featured on the upcoming cover of Ebony Magazine. MDCC also served an edible version of "rice and rocks" for lunch.

It had been over 20 years since the MDCC had hosted an author to read to the students. The children were giddy with excitement. One Rainbow Room student was so excited after reading the book and crafting her "rice and rocks," she jumped up and down yelling, "The author is coming! The author is coming!"

The special occasion prompted other community

members to join the event. Along with Richards, local Ranney School basketball coach and MDCC alumnus, Tahj Holden, came to read with the students, and take a walk down memory lane. Gilda Rogers, a local artist, author, and activist, and a frequent face on PBS, was also in attendance.

Since 1969 the MDCC provides quality childcare and early childhood education to many lower income families. The sliding fee scale of tuition allows these families to afford child care at the Center and, in many cases, the parents can return to work or school. Fundraising efforts offset a portion of the operating costs, allowing MDCC to keep its tuition affordable. The center provides tuition assistance to 90 percent of its students.