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Three innovative teaching artists introduce Middle School Students to STEAM concepts, intricate rhythmic patterns, and storytelling through masks.



Fairfax County, VA – The Arts Council of Fairfax County has placed three Fairfax artists at Cooper, Luther Jackson, and Whitman Middle Schools providing creative, interdisciplinary, and engaging learning experiences for Fairfax County students by connecting music, theater, and visual art with the core study areas of social studies, language arts, and mathematics.

- Global musician and performer **Emmanuel (Kofi) Dennis**, an African percussionist and storyteller originally from Ghana, will conduct an artist residency “*Study-Beat All Around: African Drumming Polyrythms*” featuring djembe drumming with cross-curricular connections to math.
- Nationally known theater professional, entrepreneur, and educator **Jeanne Harrison** will conduct a drama and social studies residency “*Masks: Identity Concealed & Revealed*” investigating the ritual of assuming the persona of a character mask.
- Visual artist, sculptor, and STEAM pioneer **Rebecca Kamen**, recognized internationally for her work and activism that bridges the arts with chemistry, neuroscience and astrophysics, will conduct a residency “*Crossing the Intersection of Art and Science*” integrating the visual arts and sciences.

In Dennis’ residency program, students will be introduced to the culture of West African drumming poly rhythms, which involves using the hands as well as drum sticks. The residency will inspire students to be thoughtful, expressive, and empathetic, as they communicate with words, rhythmic movements, and patterns in response to their cultural traditions.

“Middle school students are excited about the exploration of novelty and diversity,” said Dennis, who has worked with school-aged children all his life. “Since integration of the arts makes learning so much fun, my goal for the artist residency is to foster and sustain engaging experiential learning through intricate rhythmic patterns.”

In Harrison’s residency program, students investigate how masks conceal and reveal a character as they find answers to questions about how, when, where, and why people wear masks. Students are challenged to create bold and nuanced theatre as they develop and clarify their vocabulary of physical performance and improvise to tell stories that relate to themselves and the concept of persona.

"I have always been curious about how people think. How they view themselves and how others view them," said Harrison. "Theatre brings context to our lives. It tells the narratives of our struggles, our virtues, our triumphs, our failures, our hopes and our desires. In this residency, students will work together to unearth what is behind the mask."

Kamen challenges students to find new ways to visually interpret scientific theories and concepts to promote further understanding of its principles. As a result, students explore how they can translate scientific data or systems into visual objects based on their observations.

"As a resident artist, I look forward to sharing with students how art can provide a valuable, new lens for understanding science and to enable them to envision how everything in the universe is connected," said Kamen.

The Arts Council, in collaboration with Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), launched the Artist Residencies in Middle Schools program in 2014. The program is designed to create opportunities for professional artists to share their expertise through unique arts education programming that supplements the FCPS curriculum and to engage middle school students in cross-curricular learning through the arts enhancing their skills in creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration. The Arts Council first trains artists through a seminar, led by an educational consultant, to increase the artists' knowledge of state and local standards across disciplines and to become familiar with pedagogical methods appropriate for adolescent learners. After successful training, the Arts Council works with FCPS to pair the artist with a middle school.

"Our gratitude goes to our funders and FCPS for enabling this program to bloom. Through their generous support hundreds of Fairfax County Middle School students are exposed to exciting, thoughtful, and creative interdisciplinary learning experiences using the arts," said Linda S. Sullivan, president & CEO, of the Arts Council of Fairfax County.

The program is funded in part by Dominion Foundation, Jean Schiro-Zavela and Vance Zavela, Virginia Commission for the Arts, and one anonymous funder with institutional resources committed by the Arts Council and FCPS. To learn more about the program or to book a teaching artist for your middle school, visit <https://artsfairfax.org/resources/opportunities/artist-residency-program>.

About the Arts Council of Fairfax County

Founded in 1964, the Arts Council of Fairfax County, Inc. is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization designated as Fairfax County's local arts agency. It is the only umbrella organization serving and representing all forms of art in Fairfax County. The Arts Council of Fairfax County is the voice of the arts, dedicated to fostering dynamic and diverse local arts, ensuring that arts thrive by providing vision, leadership, capacity building services, advocacy, funding, education, and information.

The Arts Council is funded in part by Fairfax County, corporations, foundations, individuals, Virginia Commission for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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