A group of Fox Middle School students joked and laughed as they entered the Real Art Ways theater in Parkville Thursday.

Some glanced curiously around the funky, low-lit space; others suggested that the visit might be boring. But as images of Rosa Parks and the 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott flashed across the screen, the middle schoolers got quiet.

The film, "Mighty Times, the Legacy of Rosa Parks," contained things the students said they already knew. It showed blacks in the 1950s working hard as maids, seamstresses, day laborers and cab drivers. It showed how they lived, ate and were educated separately; from how they paid to ride the bus only to have to cram together in the back as seats in the front remained empty.

But what many of the children said they had forgotten was the unity the black community displayed, even as the discrimination and violence against them intensified.

"It was very emotional," Phillip Campbell 14, said of the film. "If more people came and saw this movie, a lot of gang violence and stuff that is going on in the streets wouldn't be happening. ... You see a lot of people going against each other, fighting about territory and none of it really matters."

The film is part of Real Art Ways' "Film Field Trips" program, which has drawn more than 2,500 Hartford students since October.

"We thought this [film] would be very striking for Hartford students because it is very segregated here, not only in our schools but in our neighborhoods," said Robyn Whittington, a program manager at Real Art Ways. "The purpose of the civil rights movement was to create change. ... We want to get them to begin to ask questions, to create that spark."

After the film, during a question-and-answer period, the children shared reactions ranging from pity to anger to
pride.

``They were inspirational people who set out to make a difference and make the way for how we live now," 13-year-old Kenneth Wilson said. ``We really got to have a team. If you work by yourself, who's going to hear you?''

Bill Harris, an independent diversity facilitator and trainer, asked the children about their own challenges, which they said include peer pressure, violence, drug dealers and name calling.

Together they discussed strategies on dealing with these issues and, through it all, Harris talked of the peace and the power of leading by example.

``We are trying to get them to see they don't have to fight back, they can deal with things in a peaceful way," said Kara Gagliarducci, who is studying the civil rights movement with her seventh- and eighth-grade English students. ``They can see it, but when it comes to their own lives, it's hard for them."

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