

Photo exhibition documents women's journeys

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Friday, September 19, 2014

With a camera, some lights and a smile, a Charlotte photographer brought the journeys of 12 local women to light.

Those women and his exhibit, Women of a New Tribe, were celebrated with a soft opening Wednesday that was anything but.

"They called this a soft opening, but when I got to the parking lot, all I could tell was that 'the tribe has arrived,'" Rocky Mount Mayor David Combs told the hundreds of people who packed the Imperial Centre for Arts & Sciences.

The primarily black-and-white photography exhibit shot by Jerry Taliaferro runs through Dec. 7, but many came dressed to the nines to be among the first Twin Counties residents to see the exhibit that highlights the strength, courage, contributions and beauty of black women, including 12 locals who were selected to be a part of the exhibit.

"When you look through the exhibit, you'll see your grandmother, your mother and your sister," Taliaferro said. "This is about the experience of women – not just black women – but all women because what and who we are, we owe to the women in our lives. They show us compassion and they show us love and they show us about being brave. This is a celebration of women and I, for one, would like to thank you."

The local participants are similar to many of the others who Taliaferro has photographed in the past in that they are professionals, politicians and community advocates, they own businesses and value education, and they all have a story to tell – especially about their significance to family members and loved ones. Taliaferro came to town early in August to capture those stories through his camera lens – an experience the city's first black female Councilwoman Helen Gay recalled as exciting.

"I have really come alive since working with this program and I really appreciate Rocky Mount asking me to participate. When you get old, everyone thinks you are dead, but you are really not," she said.

In keeping with the hopes of the Maria V. Howard Arts Center Curator Alicyn Wiedrich, Gay said the exhibit and its corresponding opening with the theater production of "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf" will bring in more people to the facility and get new residents interested in the arts.

"We need everybody to participate, and I think this will do that," Gay said. "Women of a New Tribe: these women are beautiful, but there is something beautiful in everybody."

Theater Director David Nields said the slam poetry-esque play production tells the tales of seven women in a powerful, provocative way.

"It is moving, it is funny and ultimately, it is empowering, but not blaming," Nields said. "Even I – the white guy – find things to identify with in this play."

With 40 years of productions including more than 700 Broadway performances, Nields said the script is beautifully written and paired with beautiful lighting to make for a powerful show geared toward mature audiences. Arts Center Registrar Marion Clarke Weathers said she hopes the center will feature more corresponding exhibits and productions to draw crowds and create excitement.

"You've got a group of strong women and you tell them 'You're beautiful,'" she said. "Man, nothing creates more excitement than that."

As for Taliaferro, he said he was in awe of the support for the exhibit and the warmth of folks in Rocky Mount.

"We've done this in other cities – large cities with comparable crowds – but there was a connection with the local women that was heightened more than in other places," he said.

"You could feel a connection with everybody."



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Photographer Jerry Taliaferro talks with Julia Congleton Bryant while showing her some of the photographs he took of her Friday, Aug. 1, 2014, at the Imperial Centre Theater. Taliaferro has photographed several local women for an upcoming exhibit.

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