

Kenwood hosts freedom singers

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Contributor

The Chicago Public Schools kicked off Black History Month at Kenwood Academy High School last week hosting the Robben Island Singers, who were political prisoners under apartheid in South Africa.

Having been imprisoned with Nelson Mandela before he became South Africa's first black president, the Robben Island Singers shared their experiences of living through, protesting and surviving the brutal realities of their country's racist past.

As part of their first visit to Chicago schools, Kenwood Academy, 5015 S. Blackstone Ave., was their third stop on a five-school tour. Kenwood Principal Elizabeth Kirby said the event was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students to meet in person people who struggled under government-sponsored segregation.

"We talk about Black History Month and celebrate what people have done. These are living (legends) and real examples of gentlemen who have given up their lives to the struggle to end apartheid," Kirby said.

The group sings about the movement to stop apartheid, which ended in 1994. Before each song the members would explain to the crowd the



Owen M. Lawson, III

The South African group, the Robben Island Singers, performed at Kenwood Academy last week.

importance of their fight.

Grant Shezi, a member of the group since its start in 1997, said he loved performing for the students because he was around their age when he decided to join the movement. "I find this very encouraging because I'm (educating the students)," Shezi, 50, said.

Shezi said he shares the same songs he sang while both in prison and in exile. "People could not start

their own businesses," Shezi said of apartheid. "Black Africans were oppressed in all areas of life and it was this that sparked the uprising."

One of the Kenwood students in the audience, Selenia Caraveo, said the performance inspired her. "I like that they are fighters, and they don't stop," Caraveo, 17, said.

The Robben Island Singers also performed at ShoreBank, 4659 S. Cottage Grove Ave.