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In a scene from "Invisible Soldiers," Josha Silk discusses how she will fly a P-51 Mustang. Members of the Southland College Prep High School forensics team have been performing the play about black women's contributions during World War II.

| JOSEPH P. MEIER-SUN-TIMES MEDIA



'INVISIBLE' NO LONGER

Southland high school students tell untold story of contributions from black women during World War II in 'Invisible Soldiers'

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Students tell untold story of black women in war



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Many stories have been told about World War II, but not all.

The history books contain little, if any, information about the contributions of black women during the second world war. With March being National Women's History month, this seems a fitting time to fix that.

"The truth is there were African-American women who served in the Armed Forces during that war," said Cheryl Frazier, director of forensics and theater at Southland College Prep Charter High School in Richton Park. "It's a story that hasn't been told."

These women worked as nurses, mechanics and soldiers, and at least one aspired to be a pilot. They were patriotic, loyal, hard-working. And like many Americans of that era they dreamed of a better world, in which peace, opportunity and fairness would be extended to all.

This past season, members of the Southland College Prep forensic team shared that story with the world when they participated in the Illinois High School Association Performance in the Round (PIR) event. It was Southland College Prep's first time entering that event.

"Invisible Soldiers," featuring seven female students, advanced through regionals, all the way to the IHSA sectionals. It missed making the state finals by one point.

"We went over the time limit by 23 seconds," said Josha Silk, who played the role of aspiring pilot Mildred Hemmings Carter.

"Right before Mildred was to earn her wings, she was told she wouldn't be able to fly because she was an African-American woman,"

said Josha, a junior from Country Club Hills. "This was a story that touched me."

Josha had seen performance in the round before and was excited to try it.

"Invisible Soldiers," an original dramatic piece, opens in Fort Des Moines, Iowa, at the end of basic training. It was written and produced by two of Southland College Prep's speech coaches, Andrew Malone and Lauren Wells, both of whom studied under Frazier when she coached at Thornwood High School. The production moves at a fast pace, with the students pantomiming props and at one point creating an airplane formation.

In addition to revealing the dreams of many black women, the play addresses painful issues, including racism and sexism — obstacles women faced regularly during that time period.

"I enjoyed the story a lot because a lot of times I feel invisible," said Kennedy Furnace, a sophomore from Country Club Hills.

"This was something I could relate to because people often feel they don't get recognized the way they should."

The PIR event features speech competitors not eligible for the other 14 IHSA events. The format was developed 10 years ago as a way to give the students who didn't qualify for traditional events a chance to compete. It also provides an additional opportunity for students to participate in creative performance.

When Malone and Wells realized they had eight young women to be entered in that event, they went on a hunt for a compelling story about women.

"It's hard to find scripts for women, let alone African-American women," Malone said.

So Malone and Wells, both of whom realized great success during their high school speech and forensics competition days, decided to write their own script, one that could accommodate the cast of seven, plus two student directors.

They began researching the contributions of women during World War II and were surprised to learn



In a scene from "Invisible Soldiers," Miya Hackett drops to her knees reacting to a letter informing her that her sister and fellow soldier died from tuberculosis. Members of the Southland College Prep Charter High School forensics team have been performing the play about black women's contributions during World War II.

PHOTOS BY JOSEPH P. MEIER-SUN-TIMES MEDIA



Cheryl Frazier, director of forensics and theater at Southland College Prep, said the story presented in 'Invisible Soldiers' is one "that hasn't been told."

there were so many, and that most of them had never received any attention.

"It's the nature of speech to address issues and engage emotions," Wells said. "This was their first PIR competition and they did very well."

Frazier said, "We tell the stories that have not been told or that need to be told. These are stories



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that will not get told unless we do them."

Speech and theater in Illinois at the high school level is a very conservative activity, she said. Not many black students are involved. Most of those who are hail from the south suburbs.

"I have always felt it is my destiny, my duty, to bring African-American literature and life to speech and theater because otherwise I don't think students throughout the state would know anything about African-American culture," Frazier said.

The Southland College Prep students will perform "Invisible Soldiers" again in May for the

school's spring production.

Applause for this duo

Alexus Newson, of Park Forest, and Morgan Brown, of Matteson, are experiencing great success with their piece "Saturday Night/Sunday Morning."

The juniors at Southland College Prep took home their new school's first IHSA championship medals when they won first place in the Dramatic Duet Acting section of the state finals Feb. 16 in Peoria. The students also took first place in their IHSA regional and second in sectionals.

On March 2, Alexis and Morgan placed in the top three at the National Forensic League's District tournament. That achievement sends them to the prestigious National Forensic League National Speech and Debate Tournament in Birmingham, Ala., June 16 to 21.