

EHS Teachers Gibson and Dougherty Provide Different Side Of American History

by Mary Ann Mitchell
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EDWARDSVILLE - Edwardsville High School history teachers Jill Gibson and Dave Dougherty are giving students the opportunity to learn a different side of American history. The pair designed a class called Black Experience that focuses on people and events in history that are not often talked about.

“As a history teacher, we talk so much about the same people and the same things,” said Dougherty. “Every year, history gets longer, and we don’t have enough time to dedicate to other groups of people who don’t get talked about a lot. History tends to focus on the same people over and over. And when it comes to black history, it’s typically along the likes of Dr. Martin Luther King, Harriett Tubman, and Rosa Parks. But there are so many other people.”

Both Gibson and Dougherty were involved with the creation of the class. Gibson is in her 18th year at EHS, while Dougherty is in his seventh year.

“With the racial reckoning that our country has gone through the last couple of years, I did a lot of self-educating, reading, and understanding as much as I could,” said Gibson. “While a few years ago, I felt as though we did a good job in our US History class of covering the history of multiple perspectives, the more I read and the more I learned, I realized we absolutely do not.”

Gibson joined forces with Dougherty and as the work began, the class went into the course catalog. More than 120 students signed up, which to Gibson, was a bit of a surprise.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” she said. “There wasn’t a lot of time to talk to a lot of kids about this class. We were in and out of remote learning so it wasn’t the perfect scenario to advertise it.”

Dougherty, however, said he was disappointed.

“This is not just a class for black students. It’s a class for all students. It’s an important class to understand history. So, I was disappointed because I think everyone should take it.”

They both describe the class as “history through a different lens” with Gibson pointing to the 4th of July and the Declaration of Independence as an example.

“Both of these are symbols of freedom. But it didn’t mean anything for the millions of people who were enslaved. People just don’t stop and think about it that way and we are really teaching them how to view events, people, and stories in history through that different lens. That’s an important skill they can take with them beyond this classroom.”

“History has always been taught one way and not really with a critical look at other viewpoints,” added Dougherty. “After the first semester a lot of students were saying things like ‘this is stuff they don’t teach in school’, but I had to remind them that well,

you just learned this in school. So, it's changing the way they think about what is taught in school.”

The class does have a textbook, but Gibson and Dougherty rarely use it.

“It’s really a discussion, thought-based, lots of what do you want to learn about this time period,” said Dougherty. “It’s amazing to see the excitement students have when you allow students to choose what they learn with parameters.”

“I think we both had students in previous history classes who really didn’t really engage, but with this class they were invested,” added Gibson. “And then to have the students telling others what they learn is just as exciting. These students are going home and talking to their parents, so there’s that ripple effect that one class can have.”

Not even a full year into teaching this class, Dougherty said they will continue to refine the class with things that worked and didn’t work.

“We spent many days last summer designing a class we had never taught, but I think it will be like any other class in that the more you teach it, we’re hopefully adding more value and figuring out what excites kids. Sparking that flame about learning new things is exciting.”

And while the class is named Black Experience, Dougherty wants students to remember that it is a class for everybody.

“It is easy for the black students to sign up for it, but it really is for everyone. With all the racial tension in the world today, we’re trying to dispel some of that and help students understand where different groups of people come from. That’s important.”