

Mercedes Employees Getting in Touch with Their Inner Artist

Story and photos by Gerald Scott

Bean counters from Mercedes-Benz Financial Services (MBFS) in Farmington Hills have been discovering their inner "artist" of late.

And they've been doing just that at the Detroit Institute of Arts, to be sure.

That's right, select groups of MBFS financial staff have been gathering at the DIA for art appreciation sessions, but there's more going on for the employees and the company than just a half-day off work to engage in some unusual cultural training.

This is more than art appreciation – a subtle form of team building is going on and that's what's behind this particular initiative, MBFS officials said.

To be sure, at the DIA, these financial employees are exposed to the artistic masters from different continents and different centuries, in a setting where they can express their views on the artwork – but ultimately they are not appreciating just art, they are learning to have a greater appreciation of each other.

"We are applying a strategy we know works with students – one that improves their critical thinking and communications skills – and transferring that strategy to the corporate world," said Jennifer Czajkowski, DIA executive director of Learning and Interpretation.

"Our early experience with the Mercedes-Benz Financial Services employees indicates this strategy has value for business applications as well."

That is, by expressing their views on the selected art works from the DIA's wide-ranging collection in a small-group setting, employees from MBFS' diverse workforce are learning about the different points of view informed by the intellectual and cultural frames of reference of their fellow employees.

Instead of providing art-historical facts, a DIA facilitator, in this instance, Sue Troia, instead asks the participants



DIA Docent Services Manager Sue Troia engages Mercedes-Benz Financial Services employees in a discussion of the Rubens painting, "The Meeting of David and Abigail," a Biblical allegory.

what they see in the piece. When participants offer an observation, they are asked for supporting evidence with the "What do you see that makes you say that?"

This open-ended, inquiry-based conversational format, called Visual Thinking Strategies, leads to further discussion that encourages a variety of observations from the participants.

Since the observations are backed with visual evidence, the participants have the opportunity to see and understand each other's perspectives.

Mercedes-Benz Financial Services invited the media to monitor one of these art sessions last week and what developed were some sophisticated exchanges, between employee and facilitator, and also discussion from employee to fellow employee, about what they see in a particular art piece.

A large, wall-sized Rubens painting depicting a scene from the Bible, "The Meeting of David and Abigail," drew a wide variety of responses from the Mercedes employees about what the artist perhaps intended with everything

from brush strokes, to colors, to social themes from the era it was painted in.

Leila Matta, manager of Brand Identity at MBFS, discussed what the employees, the company and the DIA are all getting out of this unique educational program.

"They go through about 5 or 6 different pieces (of artwork) and they go back to the classroom and discuss it, it encourages people to share . . . how it applies to their day-to-day lives.

"One of the challenges is having employees understand why we're doing this. Why should we take a half-day off work and go to the DIA? Why are we doing this? The relevance is coming out more and

more, the more we do this.

"A frequent comment I keep hearing is that they see this as a way to approach a business meeting or strategy session. Because we frequently collaborate and work together in groups . . . people have to be able to listen to each other's point of view without just shutting it down."

The mix of employees is broad, from management to finance to marketing, so that borders are crossed, so to speak, as they all become common colleagues, discussing different points of view that the art tends to stimulate in the discussions.

Said Matta, "So we communicated this opportunity to all of our executives and senior



Mercedes-Benz Financial Services employees from Farmington Hills check out the artwork at the DIA as part of a field trip/educational program that the financial services firm runs.

managers, and we let them extend the invitation to employees they felt (would enjoy the engagement).

"It's all about being open to different points of view. By the end of the year, we'll have 120 people who will have gone through this. And it's been going very well and I think we'll continue next year."

Finally, for the host Detroit Institute of Arts, this is just one more clever way to engage the corporate and community automotive audience, and also a way to bring suburban employees downtown to the DIA.

Many of the MBFS employees say they hadn't been to the DIA in years, and were tickled to participate.

Tuskegee Airmen Reminiscent Over World War II

Story and photo by Gerald Scott

The Tuskegee Airmen have been in the news of late, both because of the release of the George Lucas war movie, "Red Tails," as well as the fact that the unit is celebrating its 70th anniversary of service (1942-2012) this year.

The Tuskegee Airmen were officially formed as a group in 1941 in Alabama but didn't really hit stride until 1942, when they were shaped into outfits and given their first combat assignments.

The Airmen, of course, are a major chapter in 20th century and World War II history as the first air group of African American aviators who fought with the best in Europe and North Africa.

Locally, the Selfridge Air National Guard Base and its attendant Selfridge Base Community Council hosted a luncheon for four local Tuskegee Airmen.

They were feted at a big luncheon at the base dining hall, they made remarks about their experiences during World War II, both on the home and combat fronts, and then they posed for pictures in front of the same T6 trainer aircraft that two of the four pilots present actually tested on during the 1940s.

The four pilots being honored were Col. Charles McGee, Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson, Lt. Col. Washington Ross and Lt. Col. Harry Stewart.

Jefferson, for one, praised the late Air Force General Benjamin O. Davis, who is viewed as the father of the entire Tuskegee Airmen program because he was the commanding officer of both the 99th and 332nd Fighter Groups, the pride of the enterprise.

Davis even died on the 4th



Tuskegee Airmen gathered at Selfridge include, from left, Lt. Col. Washington Ross, Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson, Lt. Col. Harry Stewart and Col. Charles McGee. They are with the same T6 trainer plane that two of these four pilots actually flew for training in Alabama back in the 1940s.

of July, 2002, he was so patriotic, his pilots said.

Anyway, at Selfridge, Lt. Col. Jefferson extended praise for the Tuskegee Airmen's overall success to their father figure, the late Davis.

"B.O. Davis was the dog-gone-dest guy I'd ever seen in my life," Jefferson said. "Ramrod, hard-nosed, but fair.

"What can you say about a guy who went through West Point and during his four years nobody spoke to him (as a racial insult) unless it was official.

"They silenced him, but he still came out as No. 17 in a class of 500 (at West Point)." The late Davis was cited as being the pilot, Army officer and role model that all of the then-young Tuskegee Airmen wanted to emulate.

The group that was honored at Selfridge – McGee, Jefferson, Ross and Stewart – had combat careers that are now the stuff of legend, and the base's younger aviators and officers at Selfridge were delighted to hear their war stories as they effectively

handed down their experience to today's fliers.

Many of the mechanics and pilots from Tuskegee did advanced training at Selfridge during World War II.

Also, the noted black photographer Gordon Parks once flew with a Tuskegee Airmen unit based at Selfridge and

those photos ended up in a photo essay inside a 1940s-era issue of the original LIFE magazine.

The pilots are all aging, of course, as they are all in their 80s and 90s now, age-wise, but they said they appreciated the warm sentiment – and the standing ovation at lunch.

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