

Learning to live together: Lecturer shares artifacts of slavery at BCHS

By LISA PEARSON, The Bristol Press

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BRISTOL -- "All human beings have value."

Those were the words of Craig Kelly, a lecturer who visited Bristol Central High School Wednesday in honor of Black History Month.

Kelly has traveled extensively throughout Africa and the United States, learning about slavery, teaching about it and collecting artifacts from the time of slavery along the way.

During his presentation, he displayed a wide variety of his personal collection for students to see.

Among the pieces were slave shackles, runaway slave ankle bracelets, a Ku Klux Klan robe and slave quilts.

The quilts could be used to spread a message through the community. Monkey wrench claw quilts were often used to warn slaves that they were soon going to need to escape, and that they should prepare physically as well as mentally. Nine-patch quilts were designed to notify the slaves that they could seek refuge.

Kelly said speaking to students about slavery is important. "It's a part of American society. It's not about black and white, it's about right and wrong," he said.

Connecticut was the last state in New England to free its slaves, and thousands of enslaved people lived in Connecticut. At the height of slavery in the state, half of all ministers, lawyers and public officials owned slaves.

"Revisiting slavery isn't about being mad," Kelly said. "It's about feeling a sense of responsibility to fellow man. We all live together. If we don't live together, then we will perish together," he said.

Vernessa Elder, school psychologist, said that activities and a trivia contest have been going on throughout the month for Black History Month.

"It's recognized because the whole story of contributions to American history was not being told," she said.

Kelly reiterated that point, saying slavery and abolitionism were a culmination of both groups working together. "Slaves didn't do it by themselves, and neither did white people or slave owners," he said.

Among other slavery memorabilia on display at the school were a slave song booklet, a slave bill of sale, a slave rental receipt, abolition newspapers and pro and con pamphlets on slavery.

Kelly said many of his purchases were obtained through tag sales, auctions, flea markets and door-to-door purchases in plantation regions in the South, including Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama and New Orleans.