

## **Project provides masks for and celebrates Black community**

African Americans have especially suffered under the COVID-19 pandemic nationally, as well as here in Kent County with them comprising almost 20% of the cases, but only being 10% of the population. Seeing this need for care, Erica Millbrooks coordinated a mask-making program for her community. She is the program coordinator for the Threads sewing class at Baxter Community Center. She also coordinates the Mizizi Maji Mentoring Program for young people 9-18 years old.

With many people at home sewing masks in the beginning of the pandemic, obtaining supplies became difficult with everyone searching for the same items while stores were closed. "I ordered a lot of stuff, like the elastic, before I got the money because it was going to take weeks for the stuff to come. If I'd waited for the money, well, people needed the masks as soon as possible," said Millbrook.

Millbrooks' dedication to her community and preparation allowed she and four other women to begin quickly. Ethel Smith, Paulette Moncure, Debra Richardson, and LaShawn Johnson from the Threads sewing class and another sewist who attended classes in the past sewed the bulk of the masks. Millbrooks said "some made 100 and some made a little over 100. I have more to pick up. Baxter Community Center matched \$1,000 to get the supplies. They felt good about doing it. A lot of them gave probably more and gave from their own material."

Millbrooks said the sewists were eager to help the community this way and appreciated being able to earn additional income during the pandemic. Each woman made different styles of masks and the project focused on different types of African fabrics or used brightly colored fabric to celebrate the cultural heritage of Black people in Grand Rapids.

It turned out to be more work than Millbrook expected with organizing all the porch drop-offs and pick-ups, but she noted an unexpected benefit were the short visits she'd have with each of the women. While making masks for others, these little visits helped lessen the loneliness that comes with staying at home during this COVID-19 crisis.

The masks themselves were distributed widely in the community. Many were given out through Baxter Community Center's many programs including their market, to neighbors who came to the clinic, and to families involved in Baxter's Mizizi Maji mentoring program.

Currently there's 16 youth participating in the mentoring program and each of their families received three masks when they were recently given Chrome books. "We helped them set up the Chrome books and that's when I gave out the masks and they got to pick which ones they wanted," said Millbrooks. "Parents of the mentoring program were happy. There were smaller ones for kids. It was nice to see people picking them out and I noticed people were attracted to them."

She added, "Masks also went to Reflections, a senior housing community. We provided one to each resident, which was over 60 because their in-care workers got them, too. The mentoring kids have made pillows for them in the past, so we worked with them again." Due to the COVID-19 precautions, the masks were taped to each person's door.

Millbrooks said she also provided masks to another community member that distributed them to people in need and plans to distribute other masks to a local women's abuse shelter.

Millbrooks has enjoyed seeing people post them on social media and seeing the masks get into the hands of the community. "I packaged them in ziploc bags and included instructions for washing." The woman that posted the masks on Facebook told Millbrooks she had gone to Baxter and realized she had forgotten her mask, so Baxter gave her one. "She thanked Ethel for the mask and was able to get one for her mom as well. I said thank you, and said it was pleasant to see postings online of something I started."

Millbrook's community-centered thinking and approach led to Smith, Moncure, Richardson, and Johnson providing 450 masks to their neighbors.