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Staff photo by Allison Potter. Nnenna Freelon, left, and Maya Freelon Asante visit Lisa Schnitzler's eighth grade art class Monday, March 23 as part of their residency at Williston Middle School.

Clothesline connects culture to community

BY [LUMINA](#) ON MARCH 25, 2015 - 6:07 PM [LIFESTYLES](#)

By Pam Creech

The clothesline is a deep-reaching metaphor for the ties that bind families, communities and women together.

Grammy-nominated vocalist Nnenna Freelon; her daughter, visual artist Maya Freelon Asante; and choreographer Kariamu Welsh joined forces to create "The Clothesline Muse," a multi-media theatre project that emphasizes the clothesline's role in women's history. The story involves a grandmother who teaches life lessons to her granddaughter.

"The grandmother tells the granddaughter stories," Freelon said. These story prompts are articles of clothing; the stories are told through song, dance and visual art. By performing her original songs, Freelon plays the role of the muse — Grandma Blu. Cloteal Home plays Grandma Blu's granddaughter, Mary Mack, who is helping her pack for a retirement home.

"Every article of clothing has a story," Freelon said. "Grandma's not moving until she unpacks her knowledge."

They are accompanied on stage by five dancers.

Welsh's choreography mimics movements derived from washing, wringing and folding.

"She wanted to detach the physical movements from the work," Freelon said.

Asante uses visual art, such as colored tissue paper, to represent laundry on a clothesline.

"We tell stories that are based in history," Freelon said. "One of the pieces deals with the 1881 Washer Women's Strike in Atlanta."

Freelon was inspired by the women who defined their power during the strike.

"We wanted to celebrate women's work. We want to say that these movements are still alive and they're still vibrant," she said.

Freelon also found inspiration in the Civil Rights Movement, along with some of her favorite African-American jazz vocalists — Ella Fitzgerald, Nina Simone and Billie Holiday.

Freelon said she does not have a target audience; she wants everyone to connect with her work equally.

"This is not just an African-American story. Truth grows when we're able to empathize and see ourselves in each other's faces," she said.

"The Clothesline Muse" also has an environmental message.

"We're ruining the climate," Freelon said. "If we decide to use the wind and the sun to dry our clothes, we'll save a lot of energy."

One of Freelon's favorite parts of the show is the Talk Back, a 25-minute opportunity for the cast and audience members to have a conversation after the show.

"We love seeing what people get from the show," she said. "People will say, 'Yes, that resonated with me.'"

Freelon hopes people will continue to discuss the show even after the talk-back session is over.

"If I do have a wish for people who walk away, I want them to talk to each other. ... It starts and ends with a story," she said.

Freelon's impact extends beyond her on-stage performances. From March 16-27, Freelon and Asante completed a residency with Williston Middle School students. For two hours each morning, they directed student projects inspired by "The Clothesline Muse" to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Williston Senior High School. A sixth grade language arts class learned about interview skills and the importance of storytelling, and an eighth grade art class decorated T-shirts.

"Go with what you know," Freelon said as the eighth graders drew on colored T-shirts with paint pens and fabric markers. "As you're working on your shirts, know that there's never been a shirt quite like this in the history of life."

The students were instructed to illustrate a personal memory involving a clothesline on the front of the T-shirt and an activity they enjoy online on the back.

"This is old school meets new school," Freelon said during a Williston Middle School community gathering March 23. "If there's one thing a clothesline is, it's a broadcast."

Lisa Schnitzler, art teacher at Williston Middle School, said the students were very responsive to their time with Freelon and Asante.

"When Nnenna and Maya are in the classroom, the students are very respectful and very responsive," Schnitzler said. "They provided sketch books for every kid."

Before designing T-shirts, the students made collages with tissue paper and magazine clippings. The artwork will be displayed in the Wilmington Art Council's ACES Gallery on Front Street.

"They're going to see their work in a gallery for the first time," Schnitzler said. "My students also have tickets to see the show at UNCW."

"The Clothesline Muse" will come to Kenan Auditorium at the University of North Carolina Wilmington March 28 at 7 p.m.

Tickets are \$20 for the public and \$8 for students. To purchase tickets, call the Kenan Auditorium Box Office at 910-962-3500.