

# Kente Cloth ceremony a special heritage moment for Ross graduates

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Brooklyn Jones' grandparents drape a kente cloth across her shoulders. The cloth, which has its roots in Ghana, is a symbol of accomplishment, community, unity and pride in the African culture. *(Photo: Sheri Trusty/Correspondent)*

FREMONT - In 1996, Dr. Gayle Jackson, who now resides in Georgia, felt there was a lack of recognition for graduating African-American students at Ross High School.

She knew many of them had overcome great obstacles to graduate and would face further hurdles as they pursued a college education. So that year, she hosted the first Kente Cloth Draping Ceremony. The tradition continued, and on May 31, the 24th annual ceremony took place at Heritage Church.

Kente cloth is a handwoven textile made in Ghana. It is worn on special occasions and is still worn by African royalty today, according to Jackson. Wearing the kente cloth — which symbolizes accomplishment, community, unity and pride — is a way for the students to honor their African heritage. During the Kente Cloth Draping Ceremony, the cloth is draped across their shoulders by parents or grandparents.

Ross sophomore counselor Lesly Blanton, who helped organize this year's Kente Cloth Draping Ceremony, said the event celebrates and acknowledges students of African descent.

"It's both a celebration of the students and a rite of passage ceremony, to lead them into whatever the future holds," Blanton said.



**Jabryis Heidelberg thanks family members for their support through his high school career and shares his future plans with the audience during the Kente Cloth Draping Ceremony. The ceremony is designed to encourage and support African-American students as they continue their education after high school. (Photo: Sheri Trusty/Correspondent)**

Jackson expressed her gratitude to Blanton and the ceremony committee for continuing the tradition for Ross students.

"The Kente Draping Ceremony is important today because of the continued need to encourage students to continue their education post high school. African-Americans in Fremont still lag behind whites in their graduation from high school and attainment of bachelor's degrees," Jackson said. "The Kente Draping Ceremony is a way for the community to tell these students that they have their support."

The ceremony is usually held in a local church and is designed as an intimate event, allowing all participants to thank those who have supported them and to share their future goals. For some of the students, the small setting made the event even more special than their high school graduation. Both Jonai Crawford and Courtland Anderson said they appreciated the chance to speak at the event.

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Participation in the ceremony is completely voluntary, but for many of the graduates, the ceremony has become a family tradition.

“It’s been passed down in my family,” Crawford said. “My sister was involved in it, and I wanted to support the African-American culture.”

Anderson’s two brothers participated in the ceremony when they graduated from Ross, and Morgan Liggins’ father and cousins were involved in past years. Morgan’s cousin, Ja’Naja Liggins, also participated.



Kente Cloth Draping Ceremony participants gather for a photo prior to the event. In addition to Ross High School graduates, the event also included a college graduate and a Grove City High School graduate whose mother is a former Ross student. *(Photo: Sheri Trusty/Correspondent)*

“My mom encouraged me to do this because she’s big into keeping the culture,” Morgan said.

The ceremony included one college graduate, Dmitre Aaron.

Even though the ceremony is focused on Ross students of African descent, Blanton said students of other races are welcome to participate. Students from other school districts may participate, too, and this year, Taylor McKinstry drove from her home in Grove City to join the Ross graduates, many of whom are cousins. McKinstry’s mother, Nicole Sims, participated in the ceremony when she graduated from Ross in 1999.

“When I graduated from the University of Toledo, I had to start work right away and couldn’t attend the ceremony. Taylor accepted it for me. She was 4 years old,” Sims said.

On May 31, Sims draped a kente cloth across her daughter’s shoulders.

“This ceremony is important, because we’re a minority, and we need to show we can be successful as well,” Sims said.

The ceremony was hosted by Cassandrea Tucker, a social worker with Fremont schools, and a challenge to the graduates was given by minister Lawrence Rhea. The church was packed with friends and family who came to support the graduates. For the younger members of the audience, it was an opportunity to see firsthand all the future has to offer. That was one of the reasons Ja’Naja Liggins decided to participate in the ceremony.

“It’s important to show my culture, to show the younger generation we have something to stand for,” she said.

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