

At the start of Black History Month on Feb. 1, African-American storytellers and other authors converged on the Pennsylvania Convention Center in Center City for their 33rd annual African-American Book Festival.

The book fair is the oldest and largest fair in the country. It was created in 1992 as the African American Children's Book Project.

Over 3,500 people visited the book fair throughout the eighthour one day event for a chance to meet some of their favorite authors and pick up their favorite books.

Many of the attendees have been annual supporters of the event and came back to share their experiences and to retrieve a book in their favorite authors' series of books that were available at the fair.

"I am a reader captain, a mother and grandmother and I have been doing this for 30 years," said Patricia White from West Philadelphia. "I started going when it was at (the) Community College of Philadelphia. I brought my great-niece today, Kayla White, and it's her first time coming to the book fair. I've always been a person to read. When I was young, we were forced to read and right now it's so important for our children to learn how to read because our kids are doing very poorly in reading." "It was good to be at the book fair with my great-aunt," said Kayla, a seven-year-old, second-grade student at Ad Prima Charter School in West Philadelphia.

"Being at the **Grand Hank** table was good because I got to see one of his experiments." As people visited over 50 booths with a variety of books ranging from children's books, comics, mystery, drama, thrillers and murder stories, West Philadelphia native and University City High School alumnus known now as Master Scientist, Tyraine "**Grand Hank**" Ragsdale, manned a table, talked about why he supports the annual event, and his latest collection of books.

Ragsdale started his career in 1989 as a chemist at Johnson & Johnson after graduating from the University of Pittsburgh.

He also worked in pharmaceutical science and saw a need to get more African-Americans and people of color engaged in the sciences. From that, he started "**Grand Hank** Stem Center for Inner City Youth." Ragsdale said a grand opening of his new building is set for June 9 at 501 E. Armstrong Ave. in Germantown.

At the book fair, he introduced his new book of lab experiments called, "The Science of '**Grand Hank**.'" It's a four-book series that talks about chemistry, biology, life science, environment and physical science with lessons, activities and experiments that kids can do with their parents. He said he hopes kids will be inspired to become scientists one day.

"This is about our fifth or sixth year being here," said Ragsdale.

"The impact on kids is why I became a part of this book fair. This is our community volunteer activity of the year.

So, if you can engage kids, expose them, and let them know what's coming, then maybe they can take an interest in wanting to pursue the profession of science technology and engineering." "What I like about the book fair is that you get a variety of kids between the ages of pre-school to 12th grade," added Ragsdale.

"They are coming here because they are interested in learning and reading because this is a reading expo with books that a lot of people don't grow up with in their house. So, they don't buy books.

They look at them on the computer, scan the internet, but this is something where you can get a physical product that you can take home and you can use and pass down." "So, these are Black authors who have written books which reflect our culture," continued Ragsdale.

"I think that's what makes it unique and worthwhile to want to participate in this book fair. We also want to get kids interested and exposed. They see firsthand a Black scientist for the first time and I'm one of them."

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