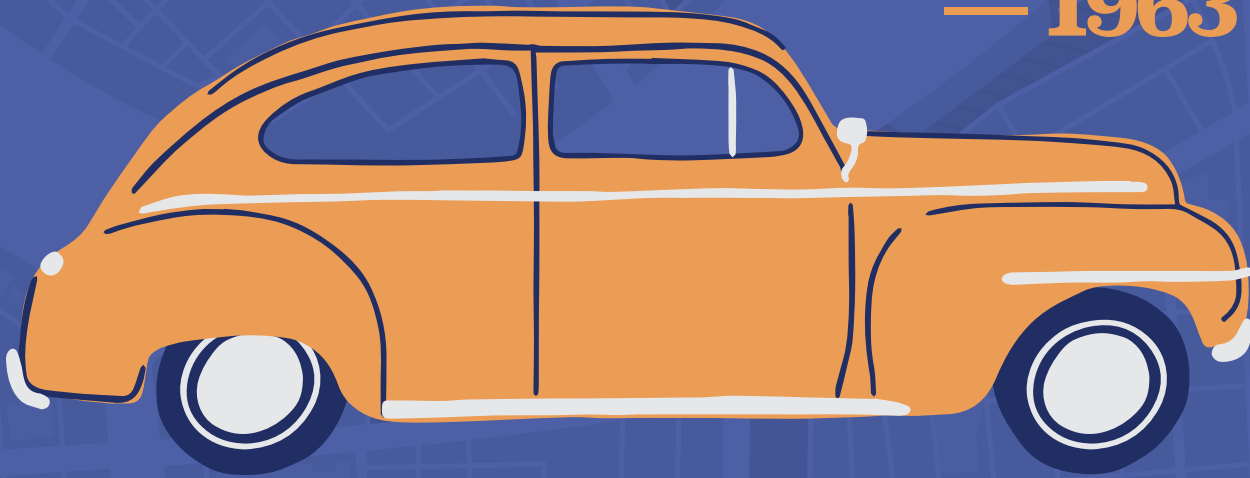


ENRICHMENT GUIDE & SOCIAL STORY

# The Watsons Go To Birmingham — 1963



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 **FIRST  
STAGE**  
TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH THEATER

PROUD CORNERSTONE MEMBER  
  
UNITED PERFORMING ARTS FUND

## DEAR FIRST STAGE FRIENDS,

Ten-year-old Kenny chronicles the events of a fateful summer for the Watson family of Flint, Michigan. When Kenny's older brother Byron starts getting into too much trouble, Mama and Daddy decide the family needs to pay a visit to Grandma Sands in Alabama to set him straight. Mama, Daddy, Kenny, Byron, and youngest sister Joetta set out on a cross-country journey, heading south and toward a moment in American history where the world seems to change before their eyes.

Enjoy the show!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julia Magnasco". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Julia Magnasco  
Director of Programming  
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# SYNOPSIS

Portions of text that appear in **bold and that are underlined** may be considered loud for some audience members.

The play opens in Flint, Michigan where we meet Kenny, the middle child of the Watson's family. Kenny begins to tell the story of his family, "The Weird Watsons", who are dealing with the behavior of his brother, Byron. Byron gets his lips frozen to the family car window trying to kiss their reflection, plays with matches, skips school and gets their hair cut and styled in a "conk" fashion. Tired of his attitude and refusal to change, Mom and Dad decide that they will drive the family down to Birmingham, Alabama so that Byron can move in with his Grandma Sands.

Dad buys a record player for the car and the family listens to music as Byron and Kenny pick at each other in the backseat. Mama has a guide for travelers of color to help them stay safe on the road, but Dad keeps driving past rest areas and hotels that are considered safe to get them to Alabama sooner. Once they reach the deep South, the family begins to see much more open racism than they are accustomed to in Flint – **and Dad and Kenny are harassed by a man on the street.**

After several days of driving, the family reaches Grandma Sands' house. Grandma Sands greets the family and surprisingly gets along well with Byron, who begins to show signs of change. The children go swimming where

Kenny misunderstands Grandma talk about a whirlpool- thinking that she actually said "Wool Pooh"- who Byron explains is the evil version of Winnie the Pooh. Trying to prove his bravery, **Kenny goes into dangerous water and nearly drowns before Byron rescues him.**

That Sunday, the Watsons prepare for church, and Kenny volunteers to walk Joey to Sunday School. **The Sunday School is bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of 1963.** Kenny enters the building to rescue his sister and feels like he is once again under attack by the "Wool Pooh" as he struggles to rescue her from the church. Kenny smashes his glasses, upset by the events. Grandma Sands explains to Kenny that the roots of family are strong and can withstand any challenge he will face.

Back in Flint, Kenny hides behind the couch, still traumatized by the events in Birmingham. Byron convinces Kenny of his bravery and his "warrior" type strength for his actions in Alabama- and Kenny decides that his family is "The Tree Root Tribe" because of their unity. Kenny, now cheered up, blows out the candles on his birthday cake after making a wish for other children in the world.

# PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS



1. "The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963" is based on a novel of the same name by Christopher Paul Curtis- it has also been made into a film. Have you ever seen or read this story before? What differences do you think there might be between those versions and the play?
2. The Watsons take a long car trip from their home in Flint, Michigan to the deep south in Alabama. Have you ever been on a long road trip before? What was the experience like?
3. "The Watsons Go to Birmingham" is a fictional story – however, it covers the real-life incident of the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing which took place during the Civil Rights Movement. Have you learned about the Civil Rights Movement in school? If so, what information can you recall?

# BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1954 – 1965)

## CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY CLASS INFORMATION

**1954 - Brown v. Board of Education:** In the 1950's, school segregation was widely accepted throughout the nation. In fact, law in most Southern states required it. In 1952, the Supreme Court heard a number of school-segregation cases, including Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. This case decided unanimously in 1954 that segregation was unconstitutional, overthrowing the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson ruling that had set the "separate but equal" precedent.

**1955 - Mississippi and the Emmett Till Case:** The Supreme Court decision fueled violent segregationist backlash against black citizens by gangs of whites who committed beatings, burnings and lynchings, usually with impunity, since all-white juries notoriously refused to convict white suspects for killing people of color. "The usual reasons for murder ranged from stealing food to talking back to a white person" (Williams 39). However, in 1955, two black men were murdered for trying to register black voters. But the case that drew the most national publicity was the murder of 14-Year-old Emmett Till, a teenager from Chicago who was visiting relatives in Mississippi that summer. On a dare from his pals, Emmett spoke flirtatiously to a white woman, saying "Bye, Baby" as he left a local store. Several nights later the woman's husband and her brother forced Emmett into their car and drove away. Till's body was found three days later in the Tallahatchie River. There was barbed wire around his neck, a bullet in his skull, one eye gouged out, and his forehead was crushed on one side. Despite overwhelming evidence of guilt based on eye-witness testimony, Bryant and Milan were found "not guilty" by an all-white, all-male jury. "The murder of Emmett Till had a powerful impact on a new generation. It was this generation, those who were adolescents when Till was killed, that would soon demand justice and freedom in a way unknown in America before" (Williams 57).

**1955 - Montgomery Bus Boycott:** Rosa Parks, a 43-year-old black seamstress, was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat near the front of a bus to a white man. The following night, fifty leaders of the African-American community met at Dexter Ave. Baptist Church to discuss the issue. Among them was the young minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The leaders organized the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which would deprive the bus company of 65% of its income, and cost Dr. King a \$500 fine or 386 days in jail. He paid the fine, and eight months later, the Supreme Court decided, based on the school segregation cases, that bus segregation violated the constitution.

# BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1954 – 1965)

## CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY CLASS INFORMATION

**1957 - Desegregation at Little Rock:** Little Rock Central High School was to begin the 1957 school year desegregated. On September 2, the night before the first day of school, Governor Faubus announced that he had ordered the Arkansas National Guard to monitor the school the next day. When a group of nine black students arrived at Central High on September 3, they were kept from entering by the National Guardsmen. On September 20, judge Davies granted an injunction against Governor Faubus and three days later the group of nine students returned to Central High School. Although the students were not physically injured, a mob of 1,000 townspeople prevented them from remaining at school. Finally, President Eisenhower ordered 1,000 paratroopers and 10,000 National Guardsmen to Little Rock, and on September 25, Central High School was desegregated.

**1960 - Sit-in Campaign:** After having been refused service at the lunch counter of a Woolworth's in Greensboro, North Carolina, Joseph McNeill, a black college student, returned the next day with three classmates to sit at the counter until they were served. They were not served. The four students returned to the lunch counter each day. When an article in the New York Times drew attention to the students' protest, more students, both black and white, joined them, and students across the nation were inspired to launch similar protests. "In a span of two weeks, there were sit-ins in eleven cities" (Williams 129). Despite beatings, being doused with ammonia, heavy court fines, arrest and imprisonment, new waves of students appeared at lunch counters to continue the movement through February and March. "By late March, the police had orders not to arrest the demonstrators because of the national publicity the sit-ins were attracting" (Williams 133). Senator John F. Kennedy, one of the candidates in the presidential election that year, sent a statement to the sit-in students in Atlanta expressing the sentiment that "they have shown that the new way for Americans to stand up for their rights is to sit down" (qtd in Williams 135). This represented one of the few times that either presidential candidate addressed a civil rights issue during the campaign.

**1961 - Freedom Rides:** In 1961, busloads of volunteers of mixed races waged a cross-country campaign to try to end the segregation of bus terminals. Their plan was to test the Supreme Court's ruling that segregated seating on interstate buses and trains was unconstitutional. Their legal action, however, was met with violence at many stops along the way. Local segregation laws were frequently used to arrest and try the freedom riders. But as one group was arrested, more arrived to take their place. Throughout the summer, more than 300 Freedom Riders traveled through the deep south in an effort to integrate the bus terminals. When freedom riders were savagely beaten in Montgomery, Alabama, one of President Kennedy's representatives was also knocked

# BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1954 – 1965)

## CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY CLASS INFORMATION

unconscious and left lying in the street for half an hour. Kennedy felt this gave him justification to send in 600 federal marshals in a showdown between the state of Alabama and the federal government. After this confrontation, Kennedy made a deal with Democratic governors and congressmen who held power in the South. He would not send in federal troops as long as they made sure there was no mob violence against the riders.

**1962 - Mississippi Riot:** President Kennedy ordered Federal Marshals to escort James Meredith, the first black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi, to campus. A riot broke out and before the National Guard could arrive to reinforce the marshals, two students were killed.

**1963 - Birmingham:** Birmingham, Alabama was one of the most severely segregated cities in the 1960s. Black men and women held sit-ins at lunch counters where they were refused service, and “kneel-ins” on church steps where they were denied entrance. Hundreds of demonstrators were fined and imprisoned.

**Birmingham; In May 1963:** Dr. King, the Reverend Abernathy and the Reverend Shuttlesworth lead a protest march in Birmingham. The protestors were met with policemen and dogs. The three ministers were arrested and taken to Southside Jail. Dr. King was held in solitary confinement for three days, during which he wrote, smuggled out of jail, and had printed his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” a profoundly moving justification for the moral necessity of non-violent resistance to unjust laws.

**Birmingham; In September 1963:** The Ku Klux Klan bombed the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, killing four little girls who, dressed in the “Youth Sunday” best, were preparing to lead the 11:00 am adult service. The bombing came without warning. Since 1911, this church had served as the center of life for Birmingham’s African American community. By the end of the day, riots and fires had broken out throughout Birmingham and another 2 teenagers were dead. This murderous act shocked the nation and galvanized the civil rights movement.

**1963 - August 28th March on Washington:** Despite worries that few people would attend and that violence could erupt, civil rights organizers proceeded with this historic event that would come to symbolize the civil rights movement. A reporter from the Times wrote, “no one could ever remember an invading army quite as gentle as the two hundred thousand civil rights marchers who occupied Washington.” Here, Dr. King gave his “I Have a Dream” speech.

# BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1954 – 1965)

## CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY CLASS INFORMATION

**1963 - November 22nd Assassination of President Kennedy.** Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson, a Texan, became the next President of the United States.

**1964 - July 2nd The Civil Rights Act of 1964:** In his first address to Congress and the nation as president, Johnson called for passage of the civil rights bill as a monument to the fallen Kennedy. While the House of Representatives passed the measure by a lopsided 290-130 vote, everyone knew that the real battle would be in the Senate, whose rules had allowed southerners in the past to mount filibusters that had effectively killed nearly all civil rights legislation. But Johnson had the civil rights leaders mount a massive lobbying campaign, including inundating the Capitol with religious leaders of all faiths and colors. The strategy paid off, and in June the Senate voted to close debate; a few weeks later, it passed the most important piece of civil rights legislation in the nation's history, and on July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed it into law. The heart of the law deals with public accommodations, so that African Americans could no longer be excluded from restaurants, hotels and other public facilities.

**1965 -- February 21:** Assassination of Malcolm X at a rally in New York.

**1965 Selma:** Outraged over the killing of a demonstrator by a state trooper in Marion, Alabama, the black community of Marion decided to hold a march. Martin Luther King agreed to lead the marchers on Sunday, March 7, from Selma to Montgomery, the state capital, where they would appeal directly to governor Wallace to stop police brutality and call attention to their struggle for suffrage. When Governor Wallace refused to allow the march, Dr. King went to Washington to speak with President Johnson, delaying the demonstration until March 8. However, the people of Selma could not wait and they began the march on Sunday. When the marchers reached the city line, they found a posse of state troopers waiting for them. As the demonstrators crossed the bridge leading out of Selma, they were ordered to disperse, but the troopers did not wait for their warning to be headed. They immediately attacked the crowd of people who had bowed their heads in prayer. Using tear gas and batons, the troopers chased the demonstrators to a black housing project, where they continued to beat the demonstrators as well as residents of the project who had not been at the march.

Bloody Sunday received national attention, and numerous marches were organized in response. Martin Luther King led a march to the Selma Bridge that Tuesday, during which one protestor was killed. Finally, with President Johnson's permission, Dr. King led a successful march from Selma to



# BRIEF TIMELINE OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT (1954 – 1965)

## CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY CLASS INFORMATION

Montgomery on March 25. President Johnson gave a rousing speech to congress concerning civil rights as a result of Bloody Sunday, and passed the Voting Rights Act within that same year. John Lewis, former freedom rider and voting rights registration organizer, and one of the young men beaten on the Selma Bridge that Sunday, currently serves as a U.S. Congressman for the State of Georgia.

**1965 -- Voting Rights Act of 1965:** Prohibits literacy tests and poll taxes, which had been used to prevent African Americans from voting. According to a report of the Bureau of the Census from 1982, in 1960 there were 22,000 African-Americans registered to vote in Mississippi, but in 1966 the number had risen to 175,000. Alabama went from 66,000 African-American registered voters in 1960 to 250,000 in 1966. South Carolina's African-American registered voters went from 58,000 to 191,000 in the same time period.

**1968 - April 4:** Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee.

**1968 - June 5th:** Assassination of Robert F. Kennedy. Robert Kennedy had inherited the hopes of civil rights advocates after the loss of Martin Luther King, Jr. Presidential candidate Kennedy was shot at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, California, just minutes after claiming victory in that state's crucial Democratic primary.

# FAMILY CREST

## ACTIVITY

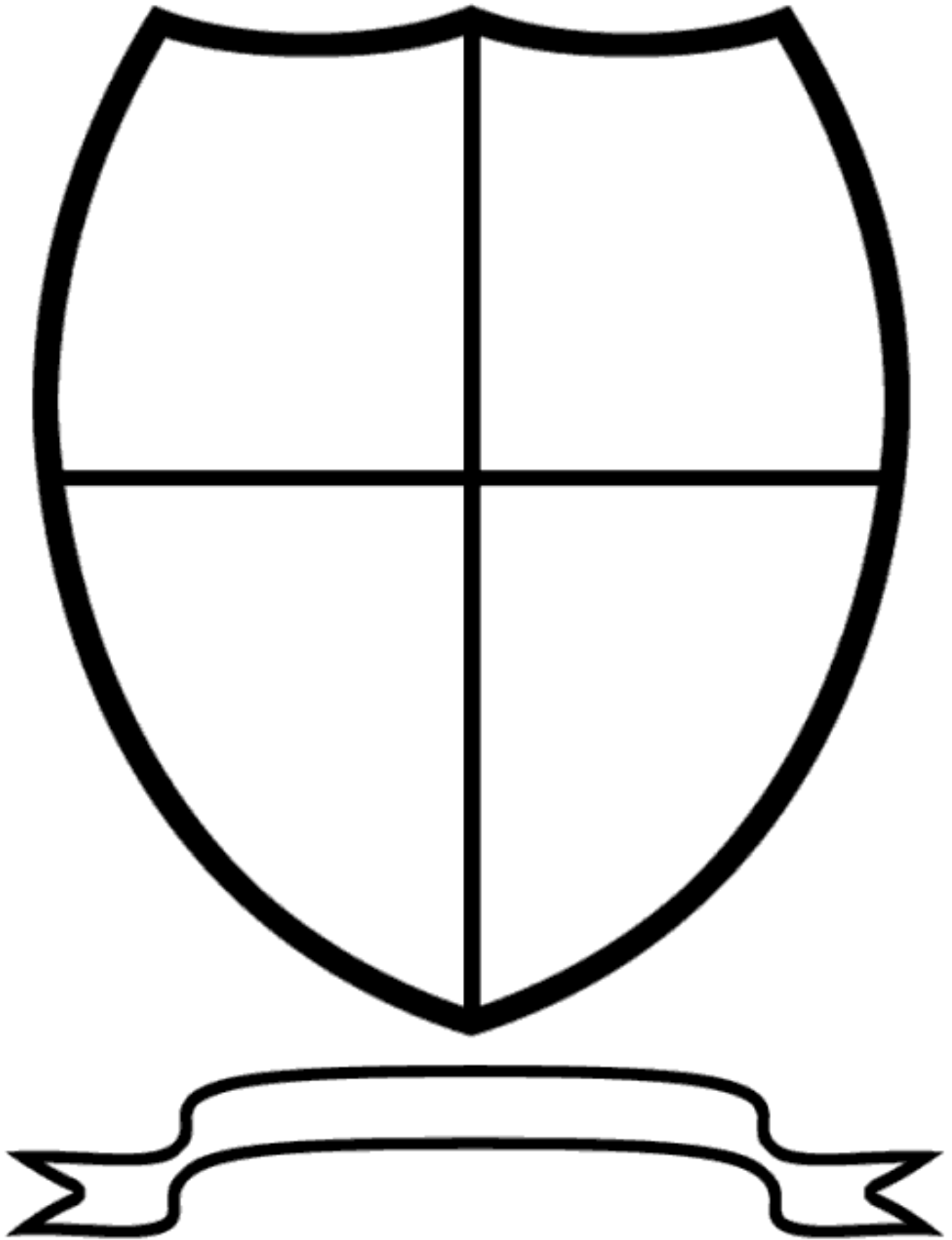
A family crest is a symbol that represents a family's history, culture and traditions. The "Weird" Watsons had many things that made their family unique and tied them together- and so do we all! Create your very own family crest to show others what makes your family special.

### MATERIALS

- Family Crest Worksheet
- Magazines
- Scissors
- Construction paper (optional)
- Crayons or markers
- Glue

### ACTIVITY

1. Discuss as a group what a family crest is and, if possible, look at pictures of different family crests. Brainstorm ideas for how you could represent your family history, culture and traditions, such as:
  - a. Flags that represent the country or countries your family came from, pictures of food that are common to your ethnicity or individual family, pictures that represent first or last names, drawings that depict favorite family events, photographs that show family celebrations, etc.
  - b. Each square on the family crest should represent a different element of your family, such as: heritage, traditions, members of the family, special events or memories, significant cultural aspects, etc.
  - c. Look through magazines and search the web for pictures to cut out and add to your crest. You may also draw pictures and symbols on your family crest.
4. Once your crest is finished, write a description explaining your family crest. Mat the crests on a large sheet of construction paper, along with your family crest description.
5. Display your family crest so that others have the opportunity to learn more about your family and to notice the similarities and differences between their family and yours!



# POST-SHOW QUESTIONS



1. "The Watsons Go to Birmingham" takes place in the year 1963. Watching this play in 2022, what similarities did you notice between that time period and now? What differences? These similarities and differences might include fashion, the way people spoke, character's behavior, or anything else you noticed.
  
2. If this story took place in 2022, but still focused on a family encountering racism what details or differences might that story include? Has racism changed or lessened since 1963? Why or why not?
  
3. The Civil Rights Movement took place in the 1960's- many people who lived through those times are still alive today. What events that have taken place during your life do you think people will discuss years from now? Why?

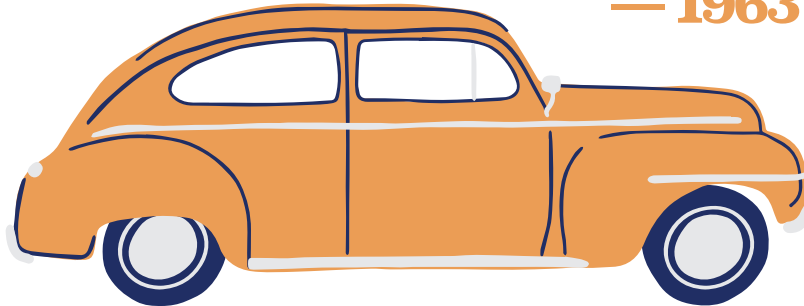
# WHO SAID IT?

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1. "Remember, no matter how tangled the roots, they're always gonna be your family."
2. "Now look, at some point you gotta quit your slobbering and make a break from the Watson Pet Hospital. It's supposed to be a hideout for pets, not for people."
3. "Folks have always called us the Weird Watsons but since our trip to Alabama seem like I've gotten weirder."
4. "Boy, you better unball your fist. Nobody told you to kiss a mirror in sub-zero weather 'cause you so in love with yourself"
5. "Mama, please don't let Byron burn me up. I don't want to get burned."
6. "I see what you mean, smartest kid in the school and he still acts like a nutcase."
7. "Looks like all the Watson warriors need a shave this morning."
8. "5:38 a.m. Time for all the Watsons to be downstairs and accounted for."
9. "Why is everybody yelling? Are we in Alabama?"
10. "Guess he's real if you need him to be. Monsters only seem to hang around when we need reminding of something. But you got me, anytime you need reminding that what you really are is a warrior."

ANSWER KEY: 1. GRANDMA SANDS 2. BYRON 3. KENNY 4. DAD 5. JOEY 6. BUPHEAD 7. DAD 8. MAMA 9. JOEY 10. BYRON

**The Watsons** Go To  
**Birmingham**  
— 1963



**GOING TO A SHOW AT  
THE MARCUS CENTER'S  
TODD WEHR THEATER**

**SOCIAL STORY**

# I am going to see a First Stage show at the Todd Wehr Theater.



I am going to see the show with

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**Watching a play is like watching TV or a movie,  
except people are on stage in front of us.**



They are called actors. They can see and hear me too.  
I can't turn the channel or turn the volume up and down.



# A play is made up of many interesting things.



Costumes



Scenery



Sound

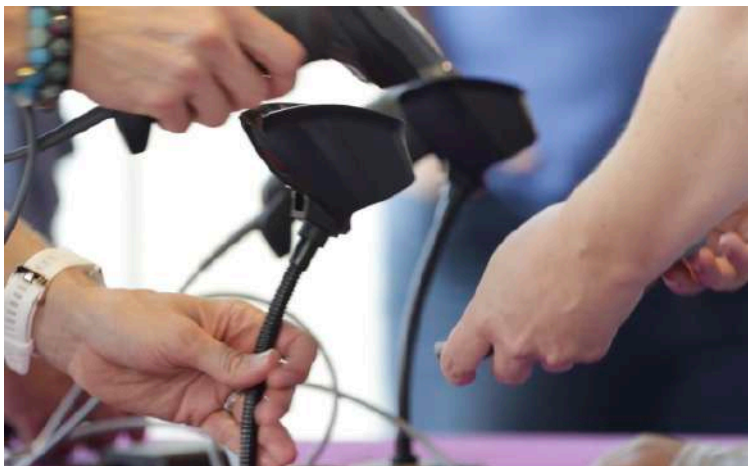


Lighting

When we arrive at the theater, we will probably have to climb some stairs. There are stairs outside the building, and inside the building.



We may need to wait in line to scan our tickets.



When we are waiting, I can stay with my family or teacher.

## Masks are required in the theater.



I will keep my mask over my nose and mouth the entire time I am there.

# An usher will help us find our seats.

We will enter the theater and find our seats.



There are bathrooms in the lobby. If I need to, I can use the bathroom before we go to our seats.

**Someone will show us where to sit.**



The audience area is for all of us.



The stage is for the actors only.

## When I am in the theater waiting for the show to start:

1. I can talk to my family or friends.
2. I can take a short break in the lobby.



# There will be a lot of people in theater and it may get noisy.

If it gets too loud:

1. I can bring headphones if I want.
2. I can put my hands over my ears.
3. I can leave the room and take a short break in the lobby.



I can come back when I am ready.

## During the show:

1. I can watch and listen to the actors quietly.
2. I can applaud if I like something.
3. I can hold things in my hand that make me feel comfortable.



## If I need to talk:

1. I can talk quietly to my family.
2. I can write down what I want to say.
3. I can leave the room.



# After the show there will be a “talkback.”

**The talkback is a chance for me to ask questions.**

1. I will raise my hand to show that I want to ask a question.
2. I will wait for the leader to call on me to ask my question.
3. I don't have to ask a question if I don't want.



**I can ask different kinds of questions:**

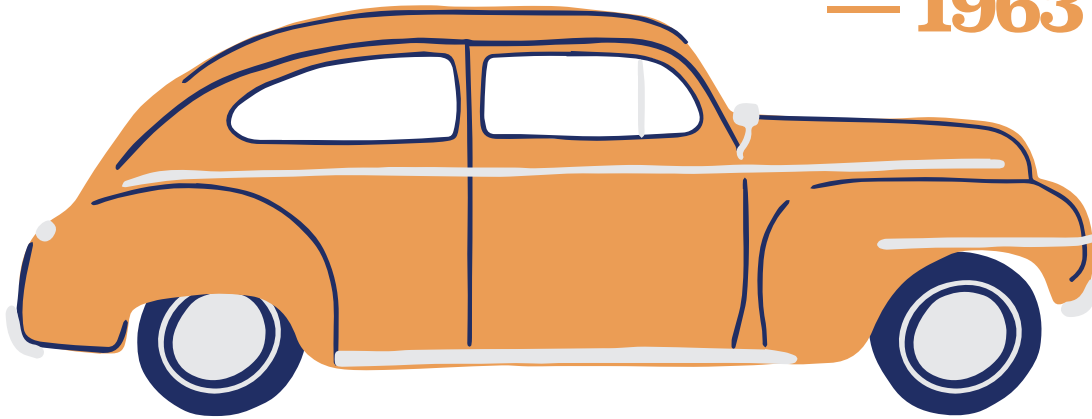
1. I can ask questions about the show.
2. I can ask questions about the scenery, costumes, lights, or sound.

**After the show is finished,  
I will leave the theater with my family.**



# MEET THE "FLINT" CAST

## The **Watsons** Go To **Birmingham** — 1963



These are the actors you will see at the  
Sensory Friendly Performance on  
Saturday, January 29, 2022 at 4pm.



# THIS IS REECE.



Reece plays the role of Kenny. Kenny is the main character in the production. Kenny is smart, caring and observant. Their nickname is "The Professor" because they are very intelligent.



# THIS IS RYON.



Ryon plays the role of Byron. Byron is called a “juvenile delinquent” and a troublemaker. Byron picks on Kenny for his intelligence. Byron likes to skip school with his friend Buphead, and is always getting into mischief around the neighborhood.



# THIS IS AMIRA.



Amira plays the role of Joey, or Joetta in the play. Joey is the younger sister of Byron and Kenny. Joey is playful, sensitive and tattles on her brothers when they are fighting.



# THIS IS KRYSTAL.



Krystal plays the role of Mama. Mama is the daughter of Grandma Sands. Mama is originally from the South and wants to send Byron to live with Grandma Sands in Birmingham because of his behavior.



# THIS IS SHERRICK.



Sherrick plays the role of Dad. Dad loves music, is very loving to his children and has a great sense of humor. Dad does not want to send Byron to Alabama because they believe it will be too dangerous.





# THIS IS CYNTHIA.



Cynthia plays the role of Grandma Sands. Grandma Sands is wise and loving to her family – but is also strict. She is Mama’s mother and the grandmother of Byron, Joey and Kenny.

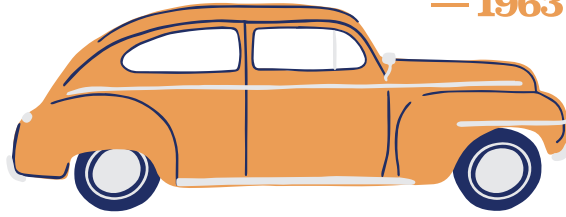


# THIS IS MILES.



Miles plays the role of Buphead. Buphead is Byron's best friend. Together, Byron and Buphead get into trouble around the neighborhood.

# The Watsons Go To Birmingham — 1963



*The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963* explores the 16th Street Baptist Church Bombing and is set during the Civil Rights Movement.