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Area's role in Underground Railroad comes to life

Mark Hare

(September 25, 2007) — At this weekend's International Frederick Douglass Underground Railroad Conference, students from Nazareth and Monroe Community College will proudly display The North Star Project, a portable exhibit depicting Rochester's role in the abolitionist movement.

"It challenged them in ways they did not anticipate when they enrolled in their classes," says David Anderson, one of the conference organizers and chairman of the Rochester-Monroe County Freedom Trail Commission. Anderson also teaches at Nazareth and advised students and teachers on the project.

The project — a collection of 10 8-foot-by-3-foot panels — documents the work of Frederick Douglass and his family, but also of Isaac and Amy Post, Harriet Tubman (the famed "conductor" who led more than 300 slaves to freedom on 18 separate trips), the Rev. Thomas James and others who rescued, housed and transported escaped slaves at great risk to themselves.

It also includes a series of "Wanted" posters depicting the faces of escaped slaves with the bounties placed on their heads — often \$50 or more for returning them to their owners. It's a vivid way to remind visitors of the humanity of those men and women who risked their lives for their freedom.

"I think the students were surprised and pleased that they could turn up so much on Rochester," Anderson says.

"It was a lot of work," says Katie Baldwin, 21, a Nazareth senior from Penfield majoring in history and anthropology. Rochester was a "hotbed for the abolitionist cause," she says. "It should be a great sense of pride for all of us, and my goal is to instill that pride in others."

The North Star Project grew out of conversations with Anderson by Marie Watkins, Nazareth's director of service learning, Timothy Kneeland, an associate professor of history at Nazareth, and Timothy Weider, an adjunct professor of sociology and community development at MCC.

The Nazareth service learning center is a resource that helps students and professors in many disciplines find ways to use what they're learning to provide service to the community.

Kneeland's African American Experience class started the project last winter, by researching a variety of sources, including archival material, on the Underground Railroad and in particular its place in Rochester. His Civil War class this summer picked it up and began to plan themes for individual panels. Weider's service education class at MCC sorted through the materials and recommended graphics to reach a final design.

"For some students it was a lesson in history in action," says Watkins. "For some it was a lesson in their history."

Yolanda Nelson, 40, is originally from Albany, Ga., and is studying human services at MCC. "I never heard of the Underground Railroad until I came to Rochester," she says. When she signed up for Weider's class, "I learned so much; they almost had to close the library on me because I had so many books out. I was so impressed with how the slaves struggled for freedom.

"I never thought I'd have a voice for something like this, but I really found my voice. I am so grateful."

Ariana Duncan, 23, of Rochester, did the graphic design work for the project. Duncan, who finished her master's degree at Nazareth this summer, now teaches art at Churchville Elementary School.

Mark Hare has been a local columnist for the *Democrat and Chronicle* since 1997. Before that, he was editorial page editor for the afternoon *Times-Union*, and before that deputy editorial page editor for the *Democrat and Chronicle*. He began his career there as a reporter in 1984. He is a native of Owego, Tioga County. He is a graduate of St. John Fisher College and the State University at Brockport. He was a high school teacher for six years before switching to journalism.



If you go
Fredrick Douglass International Underground Railroad Conference
When: Friday and Saturday.
Where: Riverside Convention Center.
Highlights: Keynote addresses by journalist Juan Williams (Friday, noon), performer Darryl Van Leer (Friday, 7:30 p.m.) and educator and artist Bernice Johnson Reagon (Saturday, 9:15 a.m.). Several workshops by educators, historians, genealogists and others.
Cost: \$150 (at the door). Lesser amounts for individual keynoters. Discounts for students.
For more information: Call (585) 256-4642, or go to www.workforcediversitynetwork.com
Fredrick Douglass Freedom Festival
When: 2 to 6 p.m. Sunday
Where: Susan B. Anthony Square, Madison Street off West Main Street.
Cost: Free.
Highlights: Historical portrayals of Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, Harriet Tubman and others; music, entertainment, tours.

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"I hope viewers come away having learned something new," she says, "but more importantly, that they have become excited by possibilities. The possibility of change and growth in our city and society. And the possibility of discovering how a small group of people, who put their mind to something, can truly do amazing things."

It was a wonderful learning experience, Kneeland says. "I think many students from Rochester are oblivious to this history and this was a way to discover that history is not just something you find in academic journals." It's the story of real people who change the world.

The North Star Project will be available for display in schools, churches and other community facilities. "We're not quite ready yet," says Marie Watkins, but anyone who'd like to arrange a visit to the exhibit can call the Nazareth Service-Learning Center at (585) 389-2444 and leave a message for Watkins.

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