



Guy Peartree

Historical Characterizations, Storytelling & Folktales

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TELLING A STORY



HERALD PHOTO – TODD HOUGAS

Guy Peartree, a storyteller from Massachusetts, performed at Roosevelt Middle School in New Britain Monday. Peartree portrayed the early life of abolitionist Frederick Douglass and gave pupils insights into 19th-century life and the abolition movement by recounting episodes of Douglass' life. The event was sponsored by McDonald's Restaurants. See story, Page A3.



HERALD PHOTO – TODD HOUGAS

Storyteller Guy Peartree performed Monday at Roosevelt Middle School, where he portrayed the life of abolitionist Frederick Douglass and gave pupils an idea of 19th-century life.

Storyteller portrays life of abolitionist Douglass

By CAROLINE PORTER
Staff Writer

It was as if Frederick Douglass, the escaped slave and abolitionist, came to Roosevelt Middle School Monday morning, and as if it were 1859.

Guy A. Peartree, a storyteller from Jamaica Plain, Mass., portrayed the early years of Douglass' life to the pupils in two groups, telling in vivid detail about Douglass' mistress being scolded for teaching him to read, and Douglass' fist fight with a master, a brutal slave breaker.

After the first performance, a male pupil asked Peartree whether Douglass had any scars from the beatings he received. "I have scars from neglect," Peartree said. "And some on my back that will always be there from my master who's always drunk."

Another pupil was interested in the root Peartree said Douglass received that gave him courage when dealing with white people. He received it as a slave, but also used it when he was on the crew of a ship later in life.

"It got really dry and started crumbling up," said Peartree. "When I was working

on the ship, they decided to beat me up, but that root was real helpful. I knew I had the power of God in me."

After the first performance, sixth-grader Tiffany Luciano said she enjoyed Peartree's acting.

"It was kind of interesting because he told us about how it is he was a slave," she said. "He made us think about how we would feel if we were him."

After the second performance, a pupil asked what Douglass' major accomplishment was. Peartree later said privately that it was working for the abolition of slavery.

"It was very easy to work for the abolition of slavery, but his most wonderful accomplishment was working for the rights of women," he told the pupils.

Principal Vaughn Ramseur said he's always been interested in Douglass, covering his writing when he taught literature to high-school students.

"It's important to hear how difficult it was for our kids to learn to read and write," said Ramseur, who is black. "People just take things for granted that weren't true years ago."

McDonald's Restaurants sponsored the performances. Eighth-grade social studies teacher Nan Eberhardt invited Peartree to come.



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Black hero 'lives' for area children

Former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass lived to see American slaves freed by President Abraham Lincoln.

SPRINGFIELD - History came to life yesterday at the Springfield Boys and Girls Club as a Boston actor portrayed a black hero - Frederick Douglass, the former slave and abolitionist who came to Springfield in 1847.

About 60 club members listened as Guy A. Peartree, the proprietor of Stories Are Tellin in Boston, portrayed Douglass in a one-man performance sponsored by McDonald's Corp. as part of Black History Month.

"It was good. I learned things I never knew," said 13-year-old Helena N. Tuitt.

Tuitt said she did not realize that Maryland was a slave state.

Terrell M. Thomas, 12, of Springfield said he had studied about Douglass in school but that seeing the show made him seem real.

The performance included the singing of old spirituals, including "Deep River," and dramatic monologue.

The actor portraying Douglass told of his birth and his childhood when he first learned that he was a slave. He talked about becoming a runaway slave who came to the North, became an abolitionist, and crisscrossed the country to speak out against slavery. Douglass lived to see the slaves freed.

Douglass came to Springfield in November 1847 to meet with John Brown, the famed abolitionist.

Brown, a Springfield wool merchant, lived on Franklin Street and provided funds to set up the underground railroad in Springfield. He was hanged for his role in the attack on Harper's Ferry, Va.

Brown was trying to secure weapons at the U.S. Arsenal there to be used to free slaves.

McDonald's is sponsoring a series of these performances in Massachusetts and Connecticut. All of the other performances were in schools.

Daniel Ashburn, a local owner-operator of McDonald's, said the chain is committed to celebrating the contributions of blacks in American history.

"McDonald's is proud to bring this educational performance to area schools around Connecticut and Western Massachusetts," he said.



Staff photo by DAVID MOLNAR

Children at the Springfield Boys and Girls Club learn yesterday about black hero Frederick Douglass, portrayed in a one-man show by Boston actor Guy A. Peartree.



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A great man speaks once more



Storyteller brings abolitionist Douglass back to life at Carney

By Jack Stewardson
Standard-Times staff writer

The tall, distinguished-looking man, dark-skinned with trim beard and dressed in a frock coat and tight-collared shirt with a cravat about his neck, talked about what it was like growing up as a slave on the shore of Maryland.

Torn away from his mother as an infant. Never really knowing who his father was. Never knowing when his birthday was. Being forbidden to learn to read or write. Being disciplined by a slave breaker.

And, most of all, being someone else's property.

"You weren't supposed to look a white person in the eye as a slave," said character

specialist and storyteller Guy Peartree, who brought abolitionist Frederick Douglass to life yesterday for students at Carney Academy, New Bedford, as part of Black History Month.

The time was 1860. It was less than a year after abolitionist John Brown conducted his raid on Harper's Ferry, Va., trying to spark a slave insurrection but establishing a flashpoint for the beginning of the Civil War.

Mr. Peartree treated a transfixed audience of elementary school students with passages about Mr. Douglass' life as he traced what life was like as a slave in the old South and what freedom ultimately meant for Mr. Douglass.

"You could really tell they were
(See DOUGLASS, Page C2)

Staff photo
by Jack Iddon

Guy Peartree cuts a striking figure as abolitionist Frederick Douglass, top right. In period dress, right, he plays the role to a packed room of students at New Bedford's Carney Academy yesterday.





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Douglass: brought back to life

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captivated,” said Carlos Ramos, a magnet school facilitator who contacted Mr. Peartree in December to arrange for him to be one of the speakers for Black History Month.

Students asked many questions about Mr. Douglass, on subjects ranging from his escape to freedom to folk remedies that slave families used for healing.

Mr. Peartree has been giving historical characterizations of Mr. Douglass since about 1990. Before that, he was a professional storyteller.

Mr. Peartree said he has extensively read the three versions of Mr. Douglass’ autobiography to help bring the abolitionist’s words to life.

A resident of Jamaica Plain, by way of North Carolina, he also portrays a 19th-century character at Sturbridge Village.

Mr. Douglass began life as a slave in the Tuckahoe district of Maryland. He was shipped as a young boy to Baltimore to learn a trade and eventually escaped to New England as a young man by disguising himself, taking a train and ship to the Northern states.

Mr. Peartree noted that Mr. Douglass had first heard the word “abolitionism” while still enslaved. The young slave learned it meant “abolishing or taking away.”

“People will resist slavery with all their might and all their strength,” he told the students.

Mr. Douglass began his life as a free man in New Bedford in 1838 after escaping from slavery when he was about 21; he lived in the city three years. It was in New Bedford that the runaway slave, who was called Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey — his surname taken from the slave name of his grandparents — took the name Frederick Douglass.

The new surname came from one of the characters in Sir Walter Scott’s “Lady of the Lake.”

There is also another close tie with Carney Academy. Two of Mr. Douglass’ sons served with the 54th Massachusetts Infantry, the same regiment in which the school’s namesake and Civil War hero, William H. Carney, served.

It was on nearby Nantucket that Mr. Douglass began his career as an abolitionist, giving his first anti-slavery speech. Mr. Douglass became one of the country’s best-known and respected abolitionist leaders, and was a strong supporter of the women’s suffrage movement.

He founded the abolitionist newspaper, the North Star, and later served as U.S. ambassador to Haiti.