

Educators shed light on North's slavery role

OYSTER BAY, N.Y. (AP) - A group of mostly White seventh and eighth graders sleepily sauntered into their school library, soon to get a surprise awakening about a part of their town's history they never knew existed.

"Did anybody in this room know there were 60 enslaved Africans, people, human beings, buried a mile from here?" Alan Singer, a professor at Hofstra University, asked them. "Those people have been erased from history. It is as if they never existed."

Singer and Mary Carter, a retired middle school social studies teacher, were in Oyster Bay recently to speak to the kids — part of a quest to develop a public school curriculum guide focusing on slavery's impact in the northern U.S., specifically New York.

Their efforts have been buoyed by state legislation enacted last year creating the Amistad Commission to examine whether the slave trade is being adequately taught in New York schools.

The commission, one of a number formed

around the country in recent years, is named for the slave ship Amistad, which was commandeered by slaves who eventually won their freedom in the U.S. Supreme Court.

"Many people are surprised when you talk about slavery's existence in New York," Carter said. "They're surprised because it's taught as something that happened in the South."

In three separate sessions with Oyster Bay students in grades 7-12, Singer and Carter sought to impart that it is important for them to know about the role slavery played in U.S. history.

They also want the students to know that racial division in the United States today "is very much a direct result of the racial divisions that come out of slavery days."

Singer, who is a social studies education professor, uses 18th and 19th century newspaper ads from slave owners seeking help in capturing their runaway slaves on Long Island, as well as diaries and other publications to document the slave trade in New York.

He cited an 1877 passage from the diary of Harris Underhill, reporting on a visit to the family homestead near Oyster Bay: "On this farm are buried sixty slaves which once belonged to the Underhills."

That was a revelation to eighth-grader Ben Selman. "I thought it was pretty interesting to find out there were actually 60 slaves buried a mile from here," he said. "I didn't realize they were so close."

Singer also tries to engage the students by using rap. Though he admits he's an awful rapper, he dons a T-shirt and cap (appropriately askew) and presses on anyway: "Time to learn the truth, our local his-to-ry, that Long Island was the land of slave-r-ry."

Most Americans do not know the story of slavery in the North, said Jill Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard University and author of "New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan."

"There's no reason to hide the fact that New York City was built by slaves," she said.

"It's an important part of the city's past."

Harlem state Assemblyman Keith Wright, who sponsored the legislation creating the Amistad Commission, said although the majority of the commission's members have yet to be appointed and no meetings have been held, he is optimistic that more schoolchildren will be taught about slavery.

Teaching about the slave trade "is the right thing to do," Wright said. "Absent South Carolina, the biggest importer of slaves was New York City."

The New York Historical Society recently presented an exhibition on slavery in New York that featured documents, paintings, video and sculpture. In lower Manhattan, a long-lost burial ground where thousands of slaves and free Blacks were laid to rest during the 18th century was recently declared a national monument by President Bush.

Slavery was abolished in New York in 1827, but when the American Revolution began in 1776, the only city with more slaves than New York was Charleston, S.C.

Katrina

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New Orleans.

In the media frenzy that followed, however, McKenzie felt like something was missing.

"It just seemed that our stories just weren't being told, and the stories that were being told, there was a particular slant to it," she said. "People were going through hell — that's the best way to explain it."

"They were trapped on roofs for days; they were trapped on the top floors of apartment buildings; parents had to give up their children because the [rescue] boats couldn't take everybody, so the kids went first; families were being separated; people had to leave their homes without their medication,

identification, without food [and] clothes. And [yet] they survived. I'm not seeing that story anywhere."

McKenzie said she also failed to see another story: the way the Black church stepped into the breach and saw to evacuees' needs while federal and state officials floundered or otherwise ignored the disaster.

"The role of the Black church was not seen at all on television. Our churches were feeding hundreds of people every day, paid for hotel bills, clothing and other kinds of essentials that are not provided by our governmental agencies. Where was that story?" McKenzie questioned. "That just wasn't being told."

She continued: "You had



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—Bishop Vashti McKenzie

people in forgotten areas outside New Orleans — Lake Charles and other small communities. You saw the Red Cross ride to the rescue in the major areas, but out in the outlying areas, this wasn't happening."

McKenzie added, "[But] when it looked like the government had forgotten our people, the Black church had not... We were there. We were there at the beginning, we were there in the aftermath, and we're still there now."

As McKenzie continued to confer with pastors in the devastated areas about the needs of the churches and people there, she began to collect stories.

Then, at the behest of Jesse Jackson, president of the Rainbow/Push Coalition, McKenzie convened a Sept. 19 conclave of representatives from major Black denominations like the AME, African Methodist Episcopal Zion and Pentecostal churches; the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and the Nation of Islam, along with officials from FEMA, the Red Cross and the U.S. Department of Justice.

At St. Andrews AME Church in Memphis, they

heard testimony from about 200 people who had been evacuated or otherwise affected by the storm. They were poor people, elderly, sick and mostly Black, and their stories were heart wrenching.

"I kept listening to the testimony from these people and I thought, 'Their stories need to be told. What they went through needs to be documented,'" McKenzie said.

So McKenzie started putting a plan into action. She called around to different churches — across denominations — and to different community organizations seeking donations. Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, the AFSCME union, the AME Church, the National Council of Churches and others were major contributors to the project, along with other individual churches, McKenzie said.

She also contacted several Black media organizations — the Afro American Newspapers, the National Newspaper Publishers Association, Mitch Media, TV One and others — to share in her vision and help publicize the untold stories.

"I thought if we were going to tell our story, we were

going to tell it through our stuff, our media," she said. "My vision was to be able to pull together several layers of media — print media with TV media with radio media — same story going almost the same time, so that we can reach the people. If I'm reading it in my newspaper and I'm seeing it on television, then maybe I just might get the point."

In mid-October, a crew comprised of a field director, field producer, photographer and two journalists spent two weeks in Louisiana and Mississippi, the two worst-affected states, conducting hundreds of interviews and capturing yards of film to chronicle Katrina's survivor stories.

There was the tale of an old woman who, left alone in her home to fend off the storm, quoted Scripture and praised God for the clothes on her back, all that was left of her life.

There was also the little girl who had seen too much and was left to imagine the fate of her friends; the pastor who one day cooked enough food to feed hundreds; and the engaged couple who packed all they could salvage into a station wagon and headed to Texas to start a new life.

Untold stories, McKenzie said, that exemplify the triumph of the people of God and of the human spirit.

"When you see people who have lost everything and they manage to hold on and say, 'We're coming back, we're getting up out of this, this hasn't beaten me,' and you're getting mad because you're caught in a traffic jam, those things become trivial now when you see people who have beaten these odds."

This project is a cooperative effort between the National Newspaper Publishers Association and the Baltimore Afro.

Wal-Mart

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tures with local dignitaries while singing Wal-Mart's praises. He cut the ribbon at a store that replaces an abandoned Kmart that closed two decades ago in the mostly Black neighborhood.

The new store has received more than 8,000 applicants for 500 jobs. Young said he expects new housing and more business to follow Wal-Mart's lead and come to the suburban area that is home to some of the country's most affluent Blacks but has stagnated in attracting jobs.

Charles Steele, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization King helped found, stopped short of criticizing Young.

"The perception is that Wal-Mart is really not a fair competitor in terms of the economy," Steele said. "What I am hoping and anticipating is that he would open up the avenues of communication to civil rights organizations, to begin dialogue and bring about meaningful solutions to a very negative situation in terms of perception."

Rev. Jesse Jackson, who also worked alongside King, reserved his negative comments for the company, not his former comrade.

"It's his private choice. That's not a public policy issue," Jackson said, adding that the shift to a "Wal-Mart economy" of part-time work without health insurance is bad for the country.

I challenge Mr. Clint Holmes and Mr. Ice Cube to save Power 88 from Rap to Tap. We have the money, where is the love? They are about to sell off the station like an old Negro slave. Please, people, do not let this happen.

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