

Black History Month

Underground Railroad comes to life for Walled Lake students

BY JENNIFER PLACINTO
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Jeff Drowno wanted youngsters to experience what it was like, on an elementary level, to be an African American slave attempting to escape bondage on the Underground Railroad.

So the Oakley Park Elementary media specialist dressed up in period costume as Peg Leg Joe and led classrooms of youngsters on 45-minute simulated versions of the life-threatening move

toward freedom northward to Canada.

With background music and sound effects, Drowno explained to the youngsters how Underground Railroad workers would teach the slaves the song of freedom about following the drinking gourd, or Big Dipper, north.

He prepared the youths for the long journey in which they'd have to stay quiet to keep hidden from hunters seeking to capture and kill runaway slaves. He

Toward the end of their journey, the children arrived at a Baptist church in Detroit where they were given "freeborn" tags to wear on their shirts before they hopped in a boat made of tipped over tables and rowed their way to Canada.

provided them with a few blankets and garments for the cold northern climate and they even had to care for infants of other slaves unable to make the journey.

The lesson was one of several conducted throughout the Walled Lake school district in observance of Black History Month.

Carrying an oil lantern to light the way through the nightly journeys, Drowno led the youths through the media center which was converted into fields, swamps and places of refuge for the slaves.

He investigated each nightly stop before the youths could rest by day inside safe houses, secret areas of homes and barns of the helping the slaves along their journey.

"You are very brave in coming here this evening," Drowno told the youths. "All of you have been working very hard, but now it's time for you to go to freedom."

He warned the children they would not be able to eat for several days and they would have to make the long journey on foot while avoiding slave catchers.

At one safe house, hidden between two book shelves, the slaves had a close call with slave catchers who beat on the doors. They were told to stay quiet and keep the babies silent so they would not be caught.

They walked through swamps to keep the hounds off their trail, waited silently as Peg Leg Joe gave a hoot and listened for a return hoot to see if the safe houses were really safe, rested



STAFF PHOTO BY TONY KOPPELBERG

Rowing to freedom: Oakley Park fourth-grader Jason Jashiewicz lends a hand rowing a boat load of "slaves" to freedom in Canada.

and ate corn bread inside a woman's barn.

Toward the end of their journey, the children arrived at a Baptist church in Detroit where they were given "freeborn" tags to wear on their shirts before they hopped in a boat made of tipped over tables and rowed their way to Canada.

When they arrived in Canada, they felt the cold chill of blasting air conditioning and saw a welcome to Canada sign scrolling across a projection screen. Before departing to go their separate ways, each slave was given a map of 10 safe homes in Michigan they could visit.

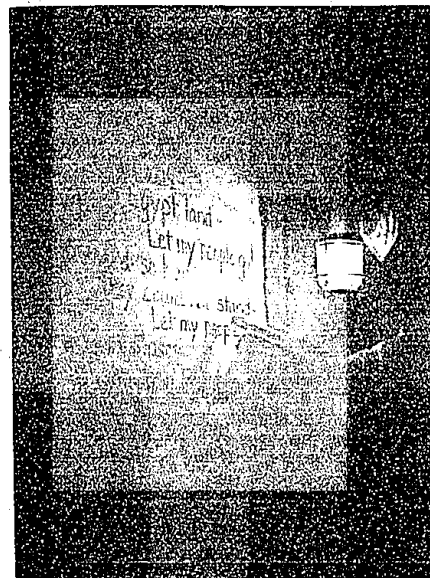
Kayla Vallosio, 10, of Walled

Lake, said she will remember that some of the slaves didn't make it through the long journey. Alex Roach, 9, of Commerce said he realized how difficult it was to hide from slave catchers.

"I learned that they had to stay low so that the slave catchers wouldn't see them," said Clay Bartlett, 10, of Commerce.



Keeping quiet: Oakley Park Elementary media specialist Jeff Drowno dressed up as Peg Leg Joe, an Underground Railroad guide who led groups of "slaves" through makeshift forests and swamps on their way to freedom in Canada.



Slave songs: Oakley Park students sang the song "Go Down Moses" before beginning their journey as "slaves" on the Underground Railroad.

Parents fight for right to chaperone students in Walled Lake

BY JENNIFER PLACINTO
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Marshall Stern said he has worked hard to remain active in his children's education.

The professional photographer opened a studio in his home to

spend more time with his three children and has been a volunteer Little League coach.

"That's the way I've set up my lifestyle — so I can be available to my kids," Stern said.

But the Walled Lake schools took away his right to chaperone his 9-, 10- and 12-year-old boys

on their school field trips.

Accused of hitting, kicking, swearing at and smoking in front of a sixth grader at Meadowbrook Elementary during an April 1998 field trip, the Farmington Hills man filed a lawsuit that summer against the school district in Oakland County Circuit Court.

On the suit, Stern denies the charges and claims the district denied him equal protection and due process, and defamed, slandered and discriminated against him, and his wife, Jill. He also contends that he lost companionship, support and suffered interference in his family relationship

due to the accusations.

Stern is seeking damages in

excess of \$25,000 and a restraining order.

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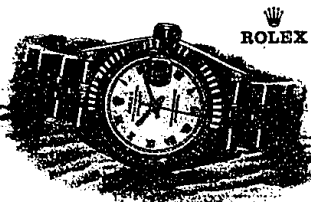
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