

BLACK HISTORY

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opportunity to educate, to stimulate, to inspire and to share what really has not been shared," she said. "It keeps the spirits and memories of these wonderful heroes and heroines alive for people."

MONTHLONG MEMORIAL

February is Black History Month, and diocesan Catholics have marked it in different ways. For example, during a meeting this month, members of the Sister Thea Bowman Catholic Women's Organization learned about John Mitchell Jr., a Richmond, Va., politician and journalist who fought segregation and lynching in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

"What Martin Luther King was doing, he was doing at that time," said Dobson's aunt, Jean Pryor, a past president of the Sister Thea Bowman group. Her organization comprises diocesan women dedicated to several purposes, including community work, charity fundraising and promoting black history.

"What it does is keeps us connected to our history, our culture and our Catholic Church," Pryor said of the group, which draws members from various parishes in the Rochester area for monthly meetings, retreats and other events. Alice Walters, another past president of the group, said its members are united by a common admiration for Sister Bowman.

"She just looked like she lived with dignity and died with dignity," Walters said of the late woman religious.

Pryor, who has done presentations on black historical figures for schoolchildren, noted that it is important for young people to learn about African-Americans of achievement such as Sister Bowman, especially since the media



CNS

Sister Thea Bowman, 1937-1990.

tends to hold up as role models mostly African-American sports figures and entertainers. She recalled once talking to a group of schoolchildren about her uncle, a builder whom she watched drawing blueprints when she was a child. One boy, who had wanted to be a football player, apparently changed his mind because of Pryor's story.

"I was just telling him what a joy that was, and after sharing that story, that's when he expressed that that was what he wanted to be, an architect," she recalled.

Touching children in this way can inspire them to live out their dreams, she noted, and keeps African-Americans in touch with past heroes.

"It's important to continue to tell the story," she said.

MARCH OF TIME

Frederick Douglass came home, in a manner of speaking, Feb. 23, returning to the Rochester street that bears his name. That street runs in front of Immaculate Conception Church, which during the past month has featured actors and actresses playing historic black figures every Sunday near the end of 10:30 a.m. Mass, according to parishioners Ramona Moore and Joanne

Gordon.

Douglass was played by Dr. David A. Anderson, a historian who this semester is teaching a St. John Fisher College course called "From Austin Stewart to Frederick Douglass: Striding Towards Freedom." The course focuses on such figures as Douglass, who published his abolitionist newspaper *The North Star* in Rochester, and Stewart, an African-American abolitionist who was an early Rochester settler.

Anderson is a founder of AKWAABA, which means "Welcome" in the Ghanaian Twi language. Through re-enactments, tours and presentations, AKWAABA's members are seeking to promote African-American history in Rochester. Its members will be among the hosts of a series of re-enactments from the lives of such figures as Douglass and Tubman at the Coleman Chapel in Murphy Hall of St. John Fisher College on Thursday, March 27, at 6:15 p.m. Admission is free.

Immaculate Conception hosted its own black history celebration, "Africa ... Our Journey," after Mass on Feb. 23. The vivid and lively celebration touched on the history of Africa, the slave trade and the African diaspora throughout the Americas. The celebration combined drumming, singing, poetry recitation, storytelling and dancing by members of the parish and the local arts community. At its conclusion, Father Michael Upson, Immaculate's administrator as well as the diocese's director of multicultural services and its black ministries office, gave an emotional tribute to the performers and others who made the celebration possible.

"We are a rich, rich people, and we have to learn from each other, and as we learn from each other, bring it into this church," he said.

Several of the approximately 50 people who attended the celebration expressed pleasure at what they wit-

nessed.

"I liked the storytelling," said Clara Smith-Bray, a 43-year parishioner who serves as a eucharistic minister and usher. "I liked the dancing. It was so open and honest."

She added that it was valuable to learn more about the history of the slave trade and its effect on African-Americans' ancestors.

"It's not something that we want repeating itself, but it's something we need to remember."

Wayne Uter, a former parish council member and an active parish volunteer, brought in educational boards that challenged onlookers to match the pictures of famous African-Americans with poems describing their achievements. Onlookers used an electric pen that would light up when its cords were linked from a metal tab next to a picture to a tab next to the correct poem. Uter, an educational trainer, said he had experienced his own bit of black history by participating in the famed 1963 March on Washington, during which Martin Luther King gave his "I have a dream" speech.

"It was hot, humid, thousands of people all crowded together but in a very positive, uplifting spirit," he said. "It was almost like a giant-size family get-together."

Given the interest stirred by Black History Month, Moore said that the parish may create ongoing adult-education presentations on black history that would take place throughout the year.

Whatever the future of such educational endeavors, Uter noted that it is important to acknowledge the sacrifices many African-Americans made in the past to build a better future for today's black citizens and black Catholics. Looking at the pictures of people such as King and Tubman that he'd mounted on his educational boards, he said: "Jesus sacrificed for us, and these folks have done the same kinds of things."

GENERAL

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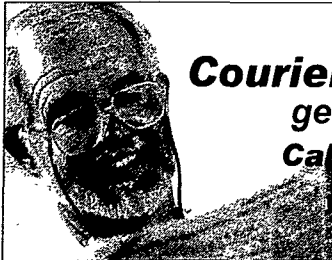
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