



# The Freedom Seeker

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Summer 2020

## Young Abolitionist Program: learn from history, move toward future

By: Amy Biancolli, *Times Union* Journalist and Author

When Mary Liz and Paul Stewart were debating whether, and how, to hold their Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute this summer, they considered the pros and cons.

On the pro side: Cracking open the resources of the Underground Railroad Education Center, a site significant in the fight against slavery and the plight of those escaping it, to young people learning about history and the battle for justice then and now.

On the con side: COVID-19. “We really held our breath,” said Mary Liz Stewart, who founded and runs the center with her husband, Paul. “Paul and I were talking about: When do we reopen? . . . What do we need to do that, to follow protocols?”

As they weighed possible paths forward, they considered the space itself: a patch of land, “just shy of an acre,” from eight vacant lots UREC acquired and revitalized over the years. In other words, plenty of room to gather outdoors in the era of social distancing. They took a look at that space, at the leadership involved, and all they wanted to accomplish this summer. “And we realized, ‘We can do this,’” she said.

The Young Abolitionist Leadership Institute is now up and running at the center, formerly known as the Underground Railroad History Project. Based in the mid-19th-century residence of Black abolitionists Stephen and Harriet Myers, the brownstone at 194 Livingston Ave. was a stop on the

Underground Railroad and a gathering place for those working to end slavery and aid those affected in their quest for freedom.

It was a fertile spot for dialogue in the fight for justice, which remains the underpinning purpose driving the Young Abolitionist program. There students learn

about history, study its ripples and repercussions in the present, and further its lessons for future UREC visitors with creative “legacy projects” — a mural, a board game, a graphic novel — that bring to life all that they’ve learned.



“We want to help the teens understand that what they’re doing, how they’re learning, how they’re changing through this Leadership Institute experience is not just about them,” Mary Liz Stewart said. “It is about them as citizens in the global society — and as part of the global society, they have responsibility, also, to not just feed themselves but to feed their neighbors.” And educate them.

Now in its 11th year, the summer institute normally hosts 40 teens and five focus-group facilitators over five weeks. This year, with safety concerns at the forefront, they have 20 students and three facilitators over four weeks. “So that was a little bit of a disappointment, that we couldn’t have, obviously, the same numbers,” Mary Liz said. “But it’s been working out very well.”

Pre-pandemic, two changes were already in the works. One was a move toward year-round Youth Leadership programming, funded with a three-year, \$253,164 grant from the Carl E. Touhey Foundation. “So that has just been an incredible vote of confidence, an incredible shot in the arm. You know, now we can really make a dream come true,” she said. Due to COVID, implementation was delayed until this fall.

The other change is a focus on environmental justice, an overarching theme that will frame each of the institute’s three focus groups. One is addressing food issues and inequality; one is working on a theatrical presentation with a

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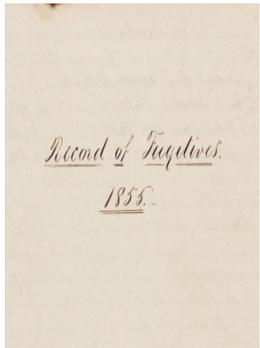
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The Freedom Seeker is a publication of Underground Railroad Education Center, a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting knowledge of the 19th century Underground Railroad Movement and its legacy in the Capital Region, in NYS, in the United States, and relating that history with us today. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to Underground Railroad Education Center, 194 Livingston Ave., Albany, NY 12210 or urhpcr@localnet.com.

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**Freedom Seeker Corner**

On Nov. 17 of 1856 Catherine Pitts aka Ann Derickson, of Berlin, Md. arrived in New York from Philadelphia with one child who was an infant in arms. She arrived at the office of Sydney Howard Gay, the editor of the National Anti-Slavery Standard Newspaper. The newspaper office was an Underground Railroad refuge. Her enslaver had been John Pitts, a preacher and doctor, who was about to sell Catherine and her husband, so her brother advised them to flee. They did so by wagon and on foot, finally reaching New York City, after which they were able to move on to freedom farther north. Ann Derickson’s story is one of the many that can be uncovered through research on the story of the Underground Railroad.



***Secret Lives of the Underground Railroad in New York City*** by Tom Calarco and Don Papson (2015) details the content contained in Gay’s unpublished ***The Record of Fugitives***.

**Young Abolitionist Program: learn from history, move toward future** (cont’d from p.1)

theme of environmental justice; the third is investigating urban blight and green spaces. “We’re learning what environmental justice is, and how it plays a role in our community. . . . and we’re learning, like, what’s fair, what’s not fair — and the green spaces around us, and if it’s fair or not in our community,” said 16-year-old Irene Frias of Albany, a rising junior at the Doane Stuart School.

Their “legacy project” will be a mural displayed somewhere around the Myers property and “visible to the whole community to see,” Frias said. They also hope to write a letter to Mayor Albany Sheehan discussing their findings over the month.

The aim in all such focus groups, Mary Liz Stewart said, is to help students “to bring their voice alive. . . . We help them to understand the value of questions, and the incredible — I don’t know — the incredible things that can happen when not only asking questions but really listening to what other people say.” To that end, “What we want them to do is to feel safe. To be willing to listen to each other and talk to each other.”

The students are with them four hours a day, five days a week, culminating with two hours of enrichment each Friday. During last week’s session, the Stewarts introduced the students to the Myers residence, its surrounding history and contemporary justice issues. Afterward, a young participant asked if he could bring someone — a supervisor he’d worked with — to the UREC to hear and learn all that the student had heard and learned that day. Mary Liz Stewart was thrilled. “I’m like, *man*, you know?,” she recalled. “Can I ask for more? ... I was so excited, because he was empowered by the experience to step forward.”

In the broader context, such experiences take place against a backdrop of police-brutality protests across the country — which the Stewarts see as the latest step in a long, arcing path toward justice that includes the anti-slavery work of Stephen and Harriet Myers, the work and struggles of Albany World War I hero Henry Johnson and, decades later, the mid-20th-century push for equality.

(cont’d p.4)

## Looking Backward and Looking Forward with UREC

### *Yours for the Oppressed, Harriet Myers*

Opening 9/07 at 5pm at

The Stephen and Harriet Myers Residence

Organized by Underground Railroad Education Center, *Yours for the Oppressed, Harriet Myers* features pieces chosen by our museum's Special Collections curator in honour of Black and Women's History Month. The exhibition centers around an 1860 letter written by Harriet Myers to white abolitionist John Jay II which is graciously on loan from the John Jay Homestead in Katonah, NY. Other works on display are publications edited and cowritten by Harriet and Stephen, as well as examples of Black abolitionist embroidery, and artwork highlighting the continuation of the movement. We are excited to share with you not only the life of Harriet Myers, but how her activist legacy continues to this day, exemplified by five local Black women: Didi Delgado, Jamaica Miles, Leah Pennimen, Barbara Smith, and Tabetha Wilson.

**International Archeology Day 2020** is planned for Saturday, October 17. Stay tuned—more info coming.

**The Back Entryway** is restored and the **Lift** is installed! Stephen and Harriet would be proud. With financial support from the Environmental Protection Fund, National Park Service Network to Freedom, Albany Community Development Agency, John T. McDonald III Legislative Member Initiative, Marjorie Rockwell Fund for the Disabled of the



Community Foundation of the Greater Capital Region, The Bender Family Foundation, and volunteer contributions of time and talent, Yankee Construction completed the restoration work in March of this year. An exciting and long-awaited development!



Paul Stewart takes a ride

## News and Notes

### **MISSION STATEMENT of UREC**

Underground Railroad Education Center researches and preserves the local and national history of the Underground Railroad movement, its international connections, and its legacy for today's social justice issues, thereby empowering people of all ages to be agents of change toward an equitable and just society.

*In these challenging times please remember that UREC needs your support if we are to empower others to carry on the work of our 19th century abolitionists to be agents of change working for a more equitable and just society. Donate today at [UndergroundRailroadHistory.org](http://UndergroundRailroadHistory.org)*



Interns Isabella Mercado and Alimatu Fatty, high school students with Prep for Prep, <https://www.prepforprep.org/>, spent five weeks of their summer



Isabella developing a rich and extensive Alimatu resource list for *5 Boros to Freedom* that highlights the African American experience in NYC and writing researched articles relating UGRR history with contemporary social justice issues.



## Stevie Wants You



**Welcome and thank you to our donors and to our new and renewing members:** Alethia Jones, Ann C. Wemple-Person, AnnMarie Hess, Anthony Opalka, Blue Shift Group, Brenda Lewis, David Hochfelder, Debra C. Martin, Diane Houselanger, Dianne E. Mathis, Dr. Leonard Slade, Enid Mastrianni, Fran Lehan, Gail R. Volk, Halldor K. Sigurdsson, Jacqueline Smith, Jean Libby, Jina' Ashline, Julia Holcomb, Kevin Keefe for Judy Doeschate and Tom Keefe, Laura A. Lee, Margaret Craven Snowden, Mark Mishler, Martha and Leo Levy, Mary Ellen Lee, Matt Kirk, Open Society Institute, Pat Oldham, Pat Savage, Prentiss Carnell, Robin Krawitz, Ruth Spencer, Steven O'Connor, Thomas K. Keefe, Esq., Twitty Styles, Zoe Nousiainen.

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### Young Abolitionist Program: learn from history, move toward future (cont'd from p.2)

The protests are “a further chapter in the struggle for civil rights that has been going on for years. . . . The focus of the Myers residence, and the focus of the Underground Railroad Education Center in a way — you could say — is a Black Lives Matter exercise,” said Paul Stewart.

His wife agreed. “The things we do with teens is part of the larger picture,” she said. At the Underground Railroad Education Center, the youth institute may be “energized” by the current protests and conversations around equity and inclusion. “But what we’ve been doing with the summer program is a piece of what the Black Lives movement is all about.”

And, they said, they’d be doing it regardless — digging into history on a quest to understand, empower and effect change.

“We’re trying to put the trowel in and turn the soil over,” Paul Stewart said, “and see what kind of exciting things can be discovered in the soil of the story that people have just been letting go in the past.”

Frias is interested in seeing what’s unearthed. “History is super important. And it’s good to know the past in order to, like, better the future,” she said. “And not make the same mistakes.”

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**Amy Biancolli** was born in Queens, grew up in Connecticut and holds degrees from Hamilton College and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. A former movie critic for the *Houston Chronicle*, she first wrote for the TU from 1991-2000 and bounced back into the local arts beat in 2012. She's published three books so far: "Figuring S--- Out: Love, Laughter, Suicide, and Survival"; "House of Holy Fools: A Family Portrait in Six Cracked Parts"; and "Fritz Kreisler: Love's Sorrow, Love's Joy." When she isn't consuming the arts or writing about them, she's fiddling around with the violin in a couple of bands, among them the gypsy-jazz group Hot Tuesday. You can reach her at [abiancolli@timesunion.com](mailto:abiancolli@timesunion.com) or (518) 454-5439.