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On the road: Indiana

Museum's Program Casts Participants in the Role of Runaway Slaves

By Linda Jarrett
Special to the Post-Dispatch

Clouds drift across a cold Indiana moon while 12 of us huddle against a brisk November breeze. We shift nervously from foot to foot, waiting for something to happen. Over in the distance, a campfire glows. We don't wait long. A gunshot shatters the silence, and a hulking figure holding a lantern lurches toward us. He yells, "Get your eyes down! Don't you dare look up at me! You're worthless to me, and I've gotta get my money back outta you good-fer-nothin' darkies! Now, get over there," and he points toward the fire.

Thus began "Follow the North Star," a program giving participants a chance to portray slaves attempting to escape to freedom. This unusual and ambitious program is offered by Conner Prairie, a living-history museum situated on 1,400 acres north of Indianapolis. With exhibits and historical re-enactments, the museum attempts to capture life as it was in Indiana in the 1800s.

Tonight, the year is 1836. Joshua Taylor has come up from the South to establish a farm in Indiana. Unfortunately, he has brought with him his slaves — and that's illegal in Indiana. Now he has to sell them to slave traders. They will take them back to the South, where they will fetch a good price. The slaves decide to escape by way of the Underground Railroad, a secret network of people sympathetic to the slaves' plight, running from the Southern states to Canada. The way will not be easy. They will travel at night and "follow the north star" to freedom. We shuffle toward the campfire and are met by three scruffy men waving rifles in the air. One of them puts his face inches from mine. "Here's a good breeder," he says. "How would you like to come with me?" I start to look up, and he yells, "Keep your eyes down!" I feel his breath hot on my cheek. My heart pounds, and I wonder what our group will do, where we will go. Suddenly, our chance for escape comes, and for the next 90 minutes we alternately walk and run through the woods. We meet friends who point us to the next safe house, and we meet cattle traders, slang for slave traders, who attempt to capture us. As we stumble along rocky paths, up hills and through thick brush, I recall the Negro spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd." I hum it under my breath as we approach a cabin with a lantern in the window.

Michelle Evans, associate director of interpretations at Conner Prairie, said it had been holding Black History Month programs for several years before this particular idea came to their attention. Developing this program took two years before its debut in 1998. "We did a lot of research and talked to many community focus groups," Evans said. "Then, once we got the scripts ready and the interpreters trained, we ran the program through educators, businessmen, church leaders and other professionals to get a wide range of feedback." "Follow the North Star" is held on selected weekends in the spring and fall. "This program is really a labor-intensive undertaking," Evans said. "And for the 32 staff members and volunteers who work the program, it's especially emotionally intense." Approximately 50,000 to 100,000 slaves used this loosely constructed escape network from the early 1800s until the beginning of the Civil War. The Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 made the return of slaves mandatory and also threatened those already freed. Congress tightened this law as part of the Compromise of 1850, requiring citizens as well as federal and state officials to capture and return slaves. As a result, even freed slaves had to be on guard against slave catchers, who made a hefty profit by selling them back to Southerners. The program, held after dark, goes on regardless of weather. It starts with a brief orientation; then the group is led outside to the starting point.

As we run through the woods, we don't know which house is the safe house and which one isn't. A Quaker family gives us food and drink. Another man forces us at gunpoint to get into his house so he can corral and sell us. We escape again, and a friendly farm woman gives us directions to a northern county where we might be safe. As we pass a house, a robed woman, known as The Prophet, steps onto her porch and calls us over. She tells each of us our fate. Some of us die, some of us make it. I drown trying to cross a freezing river. She asks us if, knowing what we know now, would we still try to escape.

Left with these thoughts, we went to the debriefing room, where we met our tormentors and the friends we encountered along the way. Evans said it was interesting to see the reactions of different groups. "Sometimes we'll have a group and we don't feel like they're getting the experience, especially if it's a school group," she said. "Then, at the de-briefing, they will ask the best questions. It's also interesting to see racially mixed groups who wouldn't normally speak of this issue before the program, come back in, having shared this experience, and have a conversation they probably wouldn't have had." Because of content and activity level, this program is not recommended for children under 12 or those with health problems. For those unable to participate in "Follow the North Star" in its outdoor setting, Conner Prairie offers an in-door version in the Museum Center Theater. Through music, talks and visual aids, interpreters give participants a similar 90-minute experience.

If you go

Getting there: Conner Prairie is at 13400 Allisonville Road in Fishers, Ind. Take Interstate 70 east to Indianapolis, then I-465 north to I-465 east to Allisonville Road, Exit 35, and go north six miles on Allisonville Road to Conner Prairie.

Dates: April 12-13, 19-20, 26-27; Oct. 4, 5, 7; Nov. 1-2, 8-9, 16-17.

Tickets: \$15 per person. Reservations required. Call 1-317-776-6006 or 1-800-866-1836, or go to www.connerprairie.org.

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