

Douglass descendant wants to create one million abolitionists

Posted by ROCCITYNEWS

By Jake Clapp

Kenneth Morris Jr. will discuss the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives' One Million Abolitionists project on Thursday, April 5, (https://events.rochester.edu/event/black_lives_matter_genealogies_the_contemporary_movement_challenges_and_opportunities#.Wrq0bIjwbIU) in the Hawkins-Carlson Room of Rush Rhees Library, University of Rochester. The event begins at 5 p.m., and is free and open to the public. Information: 276-5744; sas.rochester.edu/aas (<http://sas.rochester.edu/aas>).



Kenneth Morris Jr., a descendant of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, will give a presentation at the University of Rochester on his family's legacy and his work combating human

Kenneth Morris Jr. carries a powerful legacy. The great-great-great-grandson of Frederick Douglass, the Great Abolitionist, and the great-great-grandson of Booker T. Washington, the Great Educator, Morris is a reminder that history is all around us.

In his foreword to a special edition (<http://www.fd2018.org/narrative>) of the “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” Morris writes about his great-grandmother, Fannie Douglass, telling him of the time when, as a girl, she met “The Man with the Big White Hair.” She eventually married that man’s grandson, Joseph Douglass. Morris also recounts his Aunt Portia telling stories about her father, Booker T. Washington, and the work he did in Tuskegee, Alabama.

“A few years ago, as I was trying to wrap my mind around the time and distance between the generations, I had a profound thought: hands that touched the great Frederick Douglass and hands that touched the great Booker T. Washington... touched mine,” writes Morris. “And so it is, even with all those ‘greats,’ that I can say, I stand one person away from history.”

Morris is the son of Nettie Washington Douglass, the daughter of Frederick Douglass III and Nettie Hancock Washington, combining the family trees of two of America’s most important 19th century leaders. Despite that legacy, Morris says he was able to choose his own path, but in 2005, his friend Robert Benz gave him a copy of a National Geographic article (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0309/feature1/>) on modern slavery and human trafficking. And, Morris writes, “The life I had been living all of those years ended abruptly, and I became an abolitionist like Frederick Douglass.”

Morris, Benz, and Nettie Washington Douglass, co-founded the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives in 2007. The abolitionist organization (<http://www.fdfi.org/>) is focused on using education to fight human trafficking.

Slavery never disappeared. While every country in the world outlawed the practice, slavery moved to the black market, including here in the US. According to the United Nation’s International Labour Organization (<http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/lang--en/index.htm>), an estimated 24.9 million people globally are in forced labor and 15.4 million are in forced marriage.

Morris will be in Rochester — Douglass’s home for 25 years (<https://rocdouglass.com/2018/02/13/douglass-rochester/>) — on Thursday, April 5, to give a presentation (<http://www.sas.rochester.edu/aas/events/2018/04/one-million-abolitionists.html>) at the University of Rochester on his family’s legacy, the Family Initiatives’ work battling modern slavery, and its One Million Abolitionists project. Morris and the FDFI have also been partners in the local Frederick Douglass Bicentennial Commemoration Committee (<https://rocdouglass.com/2018/02/08/rochester-organizations-come-together-for-year-of-douglass/>).

After hearing his One Million Abolitionists presentations, Morris hopes “students and attendees walk away thinking about this idea that greatness flows through all of our veins and that we all descend from somebody that made a difference,” he said last week in a telephone interview.

One of the Family Initiatives’ current projects is One Million Abolitionists (<http://www.fd2018.org/>), which hopes to eventually distribute one million copies of a new edition of Douglass’s first autobiography — “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” — to students in honor of the 200th anniversary of the abolitionist’s birth.

The FDFI launched the One Million Abolitionists project at the Library of Congress in February 2017. The first printing was 5,000 copies — “and that was really kind of a symbolic number,” Morris said, “because that was the first printing of Douglass’s ‘Narrative’ in 1845.” Those 5,000 are gone, and the copies in the

second run of 25,000 are already committed and delivered. Morris expects a third run at the end of April, which will bring the total up to 50,000 copies.

The National Park Service is helping with the distribution of the book. And FDFI is working with [Urban Ministries \(https://urbanministries.com/\)](https://urbanministries.com/) out of Chicago, "the largest publisher of faith-based materials to the African-American church community" Morris said, "so they have a network of over 50,000 churches, from storefront churches to large mega-churches. And they're going to be doing a project this summer around their Vacation Bible School, and that'll help us get to a higher number."

"We'll get there slowly but surely," he said, "but I couldn't be more pleased with the support that we've been getting from schools and organizations that serve the population that will benefit from this book."

Morris laughed a little when we asked if one million copies is the literal goal. "Yeah, that's a great question," he said. "It's the goal. Any project that we've produced over the years, or that we put out there into the public, we want to inspire young people to believe that they can be and do anything possible. And so in my heart, in my soul, it is a literal goal, but it was intended to be a number to aspire to. And it sounds a lot better than '100,000 Abolitionists.'"

"But," he added, "even if we get 100,000, which I know we will, we're still going to impact the lives of many people."

People have walked up to Morris and told him they remember how old they were when they read the "Narrative," how it inspired them, how it affected their lives. "And so I have firsthand experience knowing that this book can change people's lives," he said.

"I've also had people tell me that they've had it in their library 35, 40, 50 years," he said. "That's one of the reasons that we did a hardcover, because we wanted it to be something that people would cherish and value and hopefully hold on to, or give to somebody else. And for many of the students that we've given it to, it's the first book in what we hope will become a library for them."

But the One Million Abolitionists project doesn't want to "hand the book to a student and just walk away," Morris said. "We know that many of them are coming from different reading levels: some will read the book right away, some may just look at the pictures, some may just read a little bit of it, put it down, and then hopefully come back to it later."

Morris and others in the Family Initiatives want to work with schools and other organizations to help spur discussions about the book's subject matter. So they've developed curricula for students from elementary school through college age.

One Million Abolitionists has been warmly received by educators, Morris said. But that hasn't been the case in the past for books and curricula related to people of color.

In the US, he said, "it's my feeling that the contributions of Native Americans and African-Americans and other people of color have really been erased from the history books. The freedom narratives have been erased."

"I'm speaking mainly from my time in public school," he added, "and I believe that it's gotten better and that stories of people of color and their contributions that have been made to our country are being taught more in the classroom.

"But I really feel like there's a lot more to do. For instance, a book like Booker T. Washington's '[Up from](#)

Slavery' (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/washington/washing.html>) or Douglass's 'Narrative' should be required reading in every classroom around the country. And that's one of the reasons that we did the project, because if it's not going to be required reading, we're going to do our best to get it into the hands of students. There's been progress made around teaching about the true history of our country, but there's still a long way to go."

In the foreword to the "Narrative," Morris wrote that he had been free to choose his own path, but had found his way back to Douglass and Washington.

"My grandfather, Frederick Douglass III, was Frederick Douglass's great-grandson, and he was a brilliant man," Morris said. "He was a surgeon. He had been commissioned down to Tuskegee in 1941 by the Veterans Administration during World War II. And that's where he and my grandmother, Nettie Hancock Washington, who was Booker T. Washington's granddaughter, met.

"My grandfather always walked around with this weight of expectation on his shoulders, and people expected him to be an iconic leader like his namesake. That pressure became too much for him to carry, and when my grandmother was three months pregnant with my mom, he took his own life. So my mother was born without a father."

Morris said his parents, grandparents, and great-grandmothers didn't want to force anything on him. That left him, as he said, free to find his own path.

"There were good things about that," he said, "and there were also things that weren't so good. The good thing was, I didn't grow up with the pressure. I certainly noticed when my ancestors had bridges named for them, and there were statues, and they were on money and stamps, and everywhere I turned, I could I could see them."

"I did feel a little bit of pressure," he said, "because I was in their shadow, and when people would find out that I was related to both of them, they would ask me, 'What do you do?' That was always the question. 'So you're related to Douglass and Washington. Well, what do you do? And it better be good.' So I always felt that kind of pressure."

And as a kid, when he did tell people about his ancestors, nobody believed him. "I didn't really feel it was a point worth arguing," Morris said. "And so I spent most of my life really, as I say, decisively disengaged from it. I was happy to be a businessman and a husband and a father, and that was it."

That changed in 2005, when he read the National Geographic cover story about human trafficking. "That's when everything changed for me," he said.

Today, his heritage has come with less a pressure: "Because I found the mission on my own, it's much more meaningful than I think it would have been had it been forced on me."

The FDFI's contemporary abolition work has faced plenty of obstacles — in part, Morris said, because of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which was passed (<https://fightslaverynow.org/why-fight-there-are-27-million-reasons/the-law-and-trafficking/trafficking-victims-protection-act/trafficking-victims-protection-act/>) in 2000.

"It really is the legislation that guides the federal government's response to trafficking, internationally and domestically," Morris said. "We believed from the start of our work that it was flawed, and it's flawed because it only addresses what happens after the victimization occurs."

At the time FDFI began its work, “99.999 percent of the organizations” involved in anti-trafficking efforts were focused on rescuing, rehabilitating, and restoring victims, “and so that’s where all the funding went,” Morris said. “There was no money, there was very little effort put forth to preventing the victimization in the first place.”

“From the beginning we were swimming upstream,” he said, “because we always wanted to use examples of my ancestors that education truly is the pathway of freedom. As I wrote in my foreword, Frederick Douglass heard his master say to him, when he was 9 years old, that education will unfit him to be a slave. We always believe that we can unfit communities to allow slavery to thrive and exist through education.”

“When we talk about education,” Morris added, “we’re talking about institutionalized knowledge and education in the classroom that’s ongoing, not an awareness campaign. Most people that work on anti-slavery issues, if you say education to them, they immediately think about educating the public on the existence of human trafficking. But we’re talking about education in the classroom and the training of educators to be able to recognize incidents of human trafficking or the signs of potential human trafficking and to be able to intervene before a kid drops out of school or before they are victimized.”

At one end of a spectrum, “young people are the most vulnerable to being victimized,” and education may help them avoid becoming victims, Morris said. And at the other end of the spectrum, “they’re the most qualified to really work on issues and become modern-day abolitionists.” Education, he said, can empower them “to want to effect change around a global issue that they can see and that they know exists.”

“When you can work with young people who will be future leaders in the sense that they may become politicians or business owners or start their own nonprofits, they’re not going to have to be convinced that this exists,” Morris said. “They already know that exist. As Frederick Douglass would say, ‘It’s easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.’”

The FDFI has started a collaboration with American University’s [Antiracist Research and Policy Center](https://www.american.edu/centers/antiracism/) (<https://www.american.edu/centers/antiracism/>) and Ibram X. Kendi, who wrote “Stamped from the Beginning.” “He is really one of the leading voices (<https://www.rochestercitynewspaper.com/rochester/replacing-racist-policies/Content?oid=4838575>) around talking about racism and racist ideology,” Morris said, “and we asked him to write a blurb in the [‘Narrative’].”

In working with Kendi, they started talking about partnering around Frederick Douglass’s bicentennial, and so Robert Benz, one of FDFI’s co-founders, has led a project with American University to develop [FD200](https://www.american.edu/centers/antiracism/fd200.cfm) (<https://www.american.edu/centers/antiracism/fd200.cfm>).

“Starting June 19, or Juneteenth, through October, we’re going to be announcing two people every day that embody the spirit and the activism of Frederick Douglass,” Morris said. “And those people will be feminists, they’ll be activists, they’ll be celebrities, sports stars — those people that we feel will be deserving of a recognition that carries the name of Frederick Douglass.”

“There will be more to come on that as we get closer to the actual announcement,” he said, “but we’ve been taking nominations on the American University website for those 200 people.

In our interview with Morris, we asked him how he feels the US has preserved Douglass’s legacy.

“Well, let me start with the positive,” he said. “The positive is that during the bicentennial, and particularly the month of February and the actual bicentennial week, I was very excited to see how much

people were celebrating and commemorating his life. I've been really encouraged by that.

"But visiting schools over the past 10 years, you know, sometimes it's a little depressing to be in certain parts of the country and the students don't even know who Frederick Douglass is or who Booker T. Washington was — and certainly our current president, on [February 1, 2017 \(http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/317337-trump-frederick-douglass-has-done-an-amazing-job\)](http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/317337-trump-frederick-douglass-has-done-an-amazing-job), kind of showing that ignorance by really implying that perhaps Frederick Douglass was still alive. That's just an example of how he's been taught in the educational system."

Another problem: "The history books, which had been written by those that are in power, have given us a really kind of sanitized Frederick Douglass. When you ask people to visualize him, many first will think about the grandfatherly figure with the white hair, a prophet looking away from the camera. That's a safe Douglass.

"Dr. Cornel West talks about the [same thing with Martin Luther King Jr. \(http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/ct-prj-martin-luther-king-radical-king-cornel-west-20150115-story.html\)](http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/ct-prj-martin-luther-king-radical-king-cornel-west-20150115-story.html) He's been sanitized in history, and we haven't been really given the radical King, we haven't really been given the radical Douglass."

"We always try to give young people the younger abolitionist, the radical Douglass," Morris said, "the Douglass who said, when he looked in the camera that he never wanted to look like a happy, amiable fugitive. He's trying to shatter the notion of what the public thought an enslaved person looked like and sounded like.

"He was very strategic in the way he used photography to be able to argue the case for liberation and equality. And he always said: 'When you look at me, you can't deny that I'm a man worthy of freedom and citizenship.'"

Near the end of interview, we asked Morris whether he personally connects Frederick Douglass strongly to Rochester.

"Oh, absolutely," he said. "I always say that his most important work was done in Rochester. It's where he published the North Star. It's his adopted hometown. It's where he chose to be buried.

"We do, every year, a trip called [Footsteps to Freedom \(https://www.facebook.com/Footsteps-To-Freedom-187755004617186/\)](https://www.facebook.com/Footsteps-To-Freedom-187755004617186/), and we bring educators from California on an Underground Railroad trip that starts in Ohio. We work our way into Kentucky and up through Michigan, and then into Canada and across Canada, down into Niagara Falls and St. Catharines. And then we go to Auburn, New York, to visit Harriet Tubman's farm, and we always end the trip at Frederick Douglass's gravesite. For the past two years, the program has grown so much that we have to do three trips."

"I've always connected his most important work with the city of Rochester," Morris said, "and it was the first place really to honor him with the statue that was unveiled in 1899."

Easton, Maryland, where Douglass was born into slavery, didn't do anything to honor him until 2011, when they unveiled a statue of him. "But we've always felt Rochester was a very special place," Morris said, "not only because it recognized his important work and his time there, but because he felt so strongly about the place and loved it."