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Monday, July 1, 2013

Frederick Douglass speech brought to life on Worcester Common

LET FREEDOM RING



Joe Glover, portraying a Buffalo Soldier, reads from the Frederick Douglass speech "The Meaning of the Fourth of July for the Negro" Monday on Worcester Common. Douglass is pictured on the banner. ((T&G Staff/CHRISTINE PETERSON))

By Alli Knothe, TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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WORCESTER — Moments after a 45-minute reading of one of Frederick Douglass' most famous speeches, "The Meaning of Fourth of July for the Negro," rain poured down on Worcester Common.

Those in the crowd chuckled at the timing as they cleared the area.

Dozens gathered at noon to listen to the 4,648-word abridged reading, which was split up into 45 smaller sections and then read aloud by participants including a city councilor and a 6-year-old, Sarah Jessica Anderson.

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Mr. Douglass, who escaped from slavery as a young man and became a prominent abolitionist, lived for several years in New Bedford. He made the speech at an event in Rochester, N.Y., on July 5, 1852.

The event was organized by the [Future Focus Media Cooperative](#) and [Youth Training Institute](#), as well as the city of Worcester and [Mass Humanities](#). Several speakers asserted that as in Mr. Douglass' time, there is still work to be done on the civil rights front.

"It is a time for us to wake up," said Mable L. Millner, associate dean of students for diversity and inclusion and director of multicultural education at the College of the Holy Cross. "There is unfinished business, and we are not there yet."

She pointed to the high unemployment rate among black people across the country, and the gap between the urban community and the middle class, especially when it comes to education.

"As we approach this year's Fourth of July holiday we come with a skepticism and disappointment at the level of ... inequality and injustice which still permeates and threatens the promise of freedom this country so adamantly cherishes," Ms. Millner said.

Cedric Arno from Future Focus Media explained that the event was meant to inspire residents, especially the next generation, to continue to fight to improve the status of black people in American culture.

"We're too settled," Kipko Johnson, a 33-year-old Worcester resident originally from Jamaica, said of the black community, after reading a passage of the speech. "We feel accomplished when we haven't really gone anywhere yet ... there's still a lot of fight left."

Ms. Millner pointed to current issues including voting rights for minorities and the case of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin, who was shot and killed by a white neighborhood watchman last February.

District 4 City Councilor Sarai Rivera spoke on behalf of Mayor Joseph M. Petty at the event.

"To some people," Ms. Rivera said, the speech "may sound harsh or direct, but actually, what (Mr. Douglass) is doing is he's crying out for justice. I think what it teaches us is that no matter what and how difficult it may be, or what situation we find ourselves in, that when there is injustice that we cry out for justice, even for those who cannot speak for themselves."

Ms. Rivera said tradition and unity was the main message of the event.

"That's what today really symbolizes ... us as a community to continue to be united and strong," she said.

Kicking off the event was a performance by the youth choir from Christ Tabernacle Apostolic Church, led by Micha Davis.

The event was sponsored by the Worcester Arts Council.

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