

Michael Eure Show – Episode 22: Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass

INTRODUCTION: Hello, this is Michael Eure, and I'd like to invite you to the Michael Eure Show, featuring student hosts and very special guests talking about a variety of interesting topics. You can find us on the Eagle Stream YouTube channel.

MICHAEL EURE: Good afternoon, and welcome to the Michael Eure Show. Today, we have very special guests Lynnette Barber and Nathan Richardson. And they are really Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, but today, they're gonna be Lynnette and Nathan for a little while. And for the audience, I wanna make sure, you know, if you have any questions or comments, you can put them in the chat at any point, and we'll address them to Lynnette and Nathan. Also, for students, if you're interested in becoming a host or having your own show, please contact me at meure@waketech.edu.

And so, we're gonna start the show off with Lynnette, asking you a question or two. Tell me, what made you decide you wanted to take on a personification of Sojourner Truth?

LYNNETTE BARBER: Well, years ago, I've always enjoyed acting, and but the singing part didn't come until I was almost 30. But I read a piece on Sojourner Truth, and it just spoke to me. And I was writing skits and different things in my church, and I decided she was someone that, beyond the church, everyone needs, needed to know about her – o many powerful things that she did in her lifetime and how, as a Black woman, she was the first of many. So, I just kind of took on the character. I asked my son's grandmother to make this costume because she could make anything from just sight, and I went on from there. And as people would learn and hear what I would do, and maybe from the church, the next thing you know, I might be, I was all types of, going all kind of places portraying Sojourner Truth.

Sorry, would you say that again, Michael?

EURE: Nathan, could you tell us what made you, and I might have had my mic muted, I'm sorry, could you tell us what made you decide to take on the personification of Frederick Douglass?

NATHAN RICHARDSON: Well, what started it for me was, I mean, I grew up as a storyteller in a family of storytellers, a community of storytellers, and found myself as a poet for early

in life in school. And so, job of writing and oratory led me to, to Frederick Douglass. A friend of mine who's a storyteller suggested that I do a historical character, she said, because there's not a lot of Black men doing historical characters. There's a lot of women like Lynnette doing the characters of Tubman and Truth and so forth. But there's not a lot of Black men doing it. So, it was just by happenstance that I started looking at various ones, Douglass, DuBois, Booker T. Washington, that I realized how poetic the language of Douglass was. And so, that's what attracted me to Douglass, besides the look, besides the fact that I have this beard ...

BARBER: True.

RICHARDSON: That is like Douglass'. Yeah.

EURE: OK. All right. Tell us, Lynnette, and then I'll ask you, too, Nathan, if people wanna get in touch with you in the future to have you come and maybe perform in schools or perform in front of groups, how can they get in touch with you?

BARBER: Well through email or by telephone. My email is lybarber6113 – OK, it's right there – @gmail.com. And my number is 919-673- and that's 6392.

EURE: It should be 6-3?

BARBER: 6392.

EURE: All right. Well, I'm, I'm just doing this now because so many people ask me after the fact, and I'll probably ask you this again at the end.

BARBER: All right.

EURE: Nathan, how can people get in touch with you?

RICHARDSON: Well, I, I think you all have my, my contact information up on screen there. My website is www.scpublishing.com.

EURE: OK. And, and they can get everything about you by going to that.

RICHARDSON: If you go there, you can find my, yeah, exactly. You can find my, my phone number. Please give me a call. Some people are, are shy at receiving phone calls, but I'm

not, I'm not trying to dodge any bill collector, so you can call me anytime, and I'll answer the phone.

EURE: And I would give him a shout ...

RICHARDSON: I'm trying to pay my bills, so go ahead and give me a call.

EURE: OK. So, what we're gonna do now, we're gonna do a clip from Lynnette, from Sojourner Truth. And we're gonna kind of all watch, and then, after we do the clip, then we're gonna come back and talk about it. OK?

And Sarah Rothman is in the background, she's doing all the audio-visual. And I wanna say thank you. I know it's not easy because we're asking you to do a whole lot of things, but thank you so much.

[Video plays of Sojourner Truth singing and telling an audience the beginning of her life story.]

EURE: All right. Well, we have a, a few questions starting, and we might as well go ahead and answer them now. And one of them is for Lynnette, "Where is the origin of the Lynnette's beautiful dress?" Where does your beautiful dress come from?

BARBER: Well, it was just bought in the department store, within the African style. But it was not especially made for me or anything like that.

EURE: All right.

BARBER: It's just the African style.

EURE: I like it.

BARBER: But thank you.

EURE: And if anybody has any additional questions or comments, please remember to put them in the chat. And someone wanted your contact information, but we're gonna put that up again for y'all if you missed it in the beginning.

So, Lynnette, tell us a little bit about that clip that we just saw. What was, what was that about?

BARBER: Well, that was just the introduction because I didn't know if that was gonna be seen before I ever said anything. But she was born in upstate New York in 1797, born a slave girl. Her first master was Ottenberg, Hardenbergh, you know, it was said was so different ways. But from narratives, it's Ottenberg on the plantation. Her mother, Ma, Ma Bateson and, and Baumfree, her father, had about 12, 13 children. And she was, well, we'll do this from the next clip, but she, she was a slave girl until she was around 27 years old and wanted her freedom. But she would, she sung. She loved to sing, and that was also another way to get attention from folks, as we can talk about a little later.

EURE: So, Sarah, we gonna try to do the second clip from Lynnette now. And in the end, you just keep remembering I'm gonna ask you how Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth interacted in the future.

[Video playing of Sojourner Truth telling an audience about her childhood.]

EURE: OK. So, now that we've seen a little bit more, can you tell us a little bit more?

BARBER: OK. Well, Sojourner, from her beginning, had a, a belief in God that was brought on from her mother. And when she would see her mother in silence and, like her mother was concerned and worried, she would ask what was wrong. And her mother, you know, and often, I guess her concerns and thoughts were for her children that she had so long, that would, had, I'm sorry, had already been sold off in slavery, and she would miss them. But she would always confide in God to help her to get through. And she also passed that down to Peter and, well, to all her children. But she told them to look up to see where her help came from.

And so, Sojourner used this through all of her life, and she would call it her conversations, where we would say prayer. She would have her conversations with God, and that's how she got her strength, that's how she got her direction. You know, when she should leave, even when she left, escaped or – and she didn't say escaped, she didn't say she ran away, she said she walked away – she walked away. And so, she, she used, she, she depended on God all through her life. She had other times later in life where she got involved in churches and all, but she knew her God. She always knew her God, and she always trusted and depended on him, which is, I feel similar, so that's what I also believe in.

EURE: We have a question from one of our great supporters from Connecticut, Rose, who's also known as Chico. She wants to know, "How close was the movie about Sojourner Truth really to the truth of her life?"

BARBER: Now, I have not seen the movie.

EURE: Oh, all right Chico.

BARBER: [Indecipherable]. But I haven't seen the movie.

EURE: All right. And now, Dr. Chris O'Riordan-Adjah, who's the head of engineering at Wake Tech, he wants to know, "At what point in our current school system are students taught about Truth and Douglass?" And so, this question is for both of you.

RICHARDSON: Well, from my perspective, Frederick Douglass, definitely, he was the preeminent Black man in the 19th century, and he is definitely recognized today by in the 20th century. And so, if there is any one Black character, male character, that is included in the conversation, it's Frederick Douglas. And so that has, and it's not just me, I mean, there are five, at least five other Douglass interpreters who stay pretty busy all across the country. And I have done lots and lots of performances in schools, K through 12, universities and everything. So, fortunately, Douglass is one of those that is talked about. I wish we could talk about more about DuBois and, and even Malcolm, for that matter. If they included Malcolm in the conversation, we would know we would be arriving at a point where we can accept what African Americans have done as far as the history of this country's, all American history.

BARBER: Right. As far as Sojourner Truth, there's not a lot mentioned. It might be, when we talk about women's rights and, you know, a little might be. And then we hear a little bit about the [indecipherable] women's speech. But as I go around and I do portrayals of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Mahalia Jackson, people do, immediately they think I'm, I'm Harriet Tubman because that's who most people are familiar with, Harriet Tubman. Not as much is said about Sojourner Truth. It, it needs to be.

EURE: All right. Another question from Patrick Faulkner, "How do you think that these two great African Americans kept their faith and kept moving forward in the face of great odds?" That's for both of you.

RICHARDSON: I'll let Lynnette go first.

BARBER: OK, OK. Well, you know, she had been born and raised to think that way, to have faith in God. And she had seen different things happen that were, you know, when she asked God questions and [indecipherable] she had seen, bigger things happened from that. So, but her mother had inbred that in her that, you know, you, you trust, lean and depend on God. And so, it just never left her. You know, sometimes, you know, when our mother tell us something, those thoughts, those ways, are always there.

And, and so, I'm thinking, even in, even when she was at a camp meeting and she struggled, scared because she's the only Black person there, and these rioters came and she got scared, these young, young white men came, she was scared, you know? "Hey I'm the only, so surely, they gonna come to me." But then she thought about her faith in God, and she thought about how God has used her and, and the strength that she has. And so, she ended up getting up, singing, talking, ended up how she's the one thing who asked others at the campground, "Come on, you wale, come with me." They were like, no, they were scared. They thought she was foolish to go, but because her faith in God and knowing that he had protected her and would cover her, she got up there and she sang her song. And next thing you know, they wanted more, and they wanted more. And she's talked to them, and they wanted more. And then she asked them, "Well, after this last one," because they couldn't get enough of her, "Could you leave, please?" And she said it, "I mean everybody," and until everybody said yes, that's what she did the last song. And they did what she asked – they left. And again, she was trusting and depending on God.

EURE: All right. We're gonna come back and talk about these camp meetings, but Nathan, go ahead and answer.

RICHARDSON: Yeah, from, from the perspective of Douglass, certainly, he, he found Christianity. He preached. He was considered a minister. But he, I think he had a little different perspective on, on Christianity and faith in that he, he used the Bible to teach himself how to read and write and used the Bible, Sabbath, Sabbath school meetings to teach other slaves how to read and write. But he saw Christianity in America at that time as two distinct and different types of Christianity: that of the slaveholding master, which used Christianity to subjectify slaves, and then that of the true, living Christ. And so, when you're reading Frederick Douglass and his narratives, he's making that distinction very clear, that there's a form of Christianity in America that is very pious and judgmental and uses evangelism as the tool to oppress people. And so, that could be directly related to some

things we see in Christianity today around the world. So, he, he had a unique understanding of, of Christianity as it, as it presents itself in America.

BARBER: And before, before, as an adult later, when she got in, say, church, but before, but even when she would go off and she would speak, when she got to that place of speaking to people, she would bring up that, “How? How do you?” Although she never read, she couldn’t read or write. So, everything she knew about the Bible had to be read to her. It’s what she had heard. But she, when she would speak at times, she would bring up that. “How do you love? How does the Bible tell you to love? Hey, you know, how does the Bible tell you these things, and this is how you treat your fellow man?” And, you know, that’s how she would come up with this. “You know, I got, I have blood just like you got. I’m, I’m a woman just like that’s a woman. The color of my skin our different.” Then she would say, “You know, God created all of us.”

EURE: OK. So, we have another question. “Tell us about your research before the internet.” How did you do your research about, before you went sharing these stories? Before the internet, I guess you used the encyclopedia.

BARBER: Well, the encyclopedia, the library, reading books.

EURE: Nathan?

RICHARDSON: Yeah, same with me. I mean, you know, I’m old school. I was born in 1960, a baby boomer. So, you know, I was, I was a kid that loved history, that loved social studies. And so, so, yeah, I [indecipherable] put away the World Book Encyclopedia and now I use my cellphone to read books.

EURE: Thank you. Well, we’re gonna get ready to ...

RICHARDSON: [Indecipherable]

EURE: All right. We’re gonna look at some more clips from Lynnette, and then we’re gonna come back, and we’re gonna certainly look at Frederick. Sorry, we’re gonna do a couple more clips from Lynnette, and then we’re gonna go back and look at Frederick Douglass’ famous speech from the Fourth of July. So, right now, we’re just gonna look at some more clips from Lynnette, and then we’ll come back and do some more questions. Thank you.

[Video of Sojourner Truth telling an audience about the love of her life and the marriage to a man she didn't love.]

EURE: All right, Lynnette. And we, we have some more questions. But what I would probably do now is to ask, Sarah, can you play the clip from Frederick Douglas, from Nathan? And then we'll come back and talk about both of them. But thank you both for your patience, and thank you audience.

[Video of Frederick Douglass discussing the irony of Americans celebrating Independence Day while enslaving people.]

EURE: Thank you very much, Nathan. I enjoyed that and have enjoyed this, too. So, we have another question from Patrick Faulkner. "If, if they were alive today, what do you think they would think about race and how African Americans have progressed or not?" Either one can go first.

BARBER: Go ahead, Nathan.

RICHARDSON: Well, this is something, and not exactly in the words of Frederick Douglass, although it's part Douglass and part, part me. I came with this kind of phrase, twist of a phrase. We're in the 19th century, during a period of slavery, the slaves would often say, "There's a sweet taste of freedom in our slavery." And I think now, if you look at situation, there's probably the bitter taste of slavery in our freedom. So, although we have made a lot of gains and achieved a lot of things, but there's still a signs of slavery, the [indecipherable] Confederate narrative still amongst us. So, if I were to gauge where we are, you know, we've move from the, the sweet taste of freedom in our slavery to the bitter taste of slavery in our freedom.

BARBER: I agree. I agree. I, I don't know, as I, as I review over the narrative of Sojourner Truth, I realize that, in some places, we are in the same places that we were in the 1800s. The feelings of, it seems the feelings of everything about our skin and, I don't know. I think there may be a little, some little disappointment that we're talking about it all these years later and we're in some of the same places, maybe not physically on a plantation, but still going through so much.

RICHARDSON: You may not be a literal slave with shackles on your feet, but if you are still

being told when to work, where to work or how much your work, then you might be a slave of society.

EURE: We had a comment from Richard Redding, which is really referring to the fact that he saw a book with Douglass' picture on it. And so, we've got to make sure that our young people get to see more images. And I think the depictions of people like you are images, so I appreciate what you do, and we've got to kind of push you out there. So, let's get your contact information one more time because we're gonna definitely try to get you back at Wake Tech in the future. And maybe you can come and be Frederick and Sojourner for our students virtually, if not physically. OK?

BARBER: Can I just say this? I know we say that they're not teaching it in schools because we also know there's no prayer in, no longer in school, but I think we as parents, we as aunts, we as uncles, we as grandparents, we need to pass this on to our children. It just shouldn't be depending on if the school does it. I am a school teacher, and I make sure I push it in my classroom and if they're having anything at the school, or in the past, I even have had Black history performances, those type of things for the kids, and the, and the students participated.

But again, I say so did I learn about this in school? Did not. But my father had the black set of encyclopedias at home that he was reading through or would, different things he would discuss and say. So, that's where my interest came from, from my father. So, when I asked you today, we live [indecipherable], our finger, all knowledge is at the stroke of our fingers. We do not have to get up and go to the library. We do not have to read this long story. We even got audio if we don't wanna read it. We can listen to it. So, when I asked you as parents, as aunts, uncles, all the others, you don't even have to be their mother or father, if their mother or father ain't gonna do it, you can do it. You give them this knowledge, give yourself this knowledge because, the more you find out about your past, the stronger you know you are.

EURE: I'm gonna respond to, Dr. Michael Wood made a comment about how do we as brown and Black people prepare the next generation. So, I just happened to be working with my family reunion, which is going to be virtual this year on July 26th. And I think that we need to get this history integrated into the families because there are parallels. When I think about my great-grandparents, whom I did get to know, they were helping people, you know. And we need to remember that we're standing on the shoulders of our great ancestors and all the things that they've done. So, it's not like these are fictional. It's not

just Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth or Frederick Washington. It's Emaline Langston and Will Langston and, and the current people, Lynnette Barber and Nathan Richardson.

So, I think that we need to, as you say, Lynnette, we need to make it real for them and let them know this is not some faraway thing. You know, we have only been removed from slavery a little while when you think about the length of time this country has existed and the world has existed. So, we have done great things, but we can do greater.

Nathan, I'm sorry. I just jumped on in. Now, we have another question from Joshua, who is a, a student. "Why don't you think Frederick Douglass' speech against the Fourth of July doesn't get recognized today when it is still so relevant?"

RICHARDSON: Well, I, I tell you what, I'm, I'm leaning on what Lynnette said. If you're not aware of these characters – and these are the foremost characters, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington – if you, if you're not aware of who these people are and what they've read, then you're letting your education get in the way of your schooling. That's a quote from Mark Twain. "Don't let your education get in the way of your schooling." There's learning outside of the classroom, and, and so, Frederick Douglass, his, this was actually, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" is his premiere speech. That's the one I'm most often asked about. And it's highly misunderstood as well, because some people see it as a, I mean, he was certainly being very critical of the Constitution and liberty, the Fourth of July, but he was also asking us to, to reflect on what we could do, what we should be doing to make this a more perfect union. So, in introducing that speech, he was saying to the audience, he was quoting a guy named Sidney Smith, who said, "Men seldom eulogize the fame and fortune of their forefathers without leaving out or avoiding some folly or wickedness of their own."

Wait, our forefathers wrote this Constitution, but what are we doing to build on the Constitution? It's not a dead letter. If we get out there and become activists, we can create, if there's a 13th, 14th and 15th Amendment, there can be, you know, a 25th amendment as well if you so exercise your rights. Right? But if you divest yourself of the Constitution, then there will be no new amendments, not from your perspective anyway. So, so that's what he [indecipherable] in the Fourth of July speech, that spot or the sweet part. Just like when you hear "I have a dream." You hear the sweet side of Martin Luther King. But how many of us go beyond the "I have a dream" rhetoric and listen to the actual words, the whole speech about "I have a dream"? How many of us go further beyond "I have a dream" to "A knock at midnight," you know, the speech on Vietnam? We do not do that. So, so this, you know, we have a responsibility to ourselves, to educate ourselves.

BARBER: Sure.

EURE: That was great.

BARBER: I do agree with that.

EURE: OK. Thank you. My cousin is looking forward to the reunion. I will say this: Nathan is from Virginia, and we've had at least three in Virginia. We had one in Suffolk, the last one was in Hampton, and we've had it at Virginia Beach. So, I've been using this week to exercise early in the morning, and I have on my reunion T-shirt, so I shouted out through my neighborhood so they know. Family reunions are important. Families are important.

So, we're getting ready to wind it down. So, either one, and I wanna let the audience know, on July 30th, they will be back, and they will be in costume. She will be Sojourner Truth, and he will be Frederick Douglass. So, you're welcome. And if you have friends that missed this, it will be on YouTube starting this evening. And so, y'all have closing comments? I'm turning it over to you lately, I mean Nathan and Lynnette, whichever one wants to go first. Give your contact information, of course, always.

BARBER: OK, my contact information is lybarber, right there, 6113@gmail, and my number is 919-673-6392, and I do Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Mahalia Jackson in costume. And I'm also working on Fannie Lou Hamer right now with this situation of us voting and learning about all the people we're voting for. I want to start getting that out there to help get some information out about that.

But I just want us to know, as a people, that we need to be proud from whence we came, even if it was from slavery, even if it was from there. Because sometimes, when I've talked to kids over the years, it was, like, "We don't wanna hear about that because ..." almost like it's embarrassing because we were slaves. All right, but other races have been slaves. Other races, other races have been so many other things, have gone through things, Jewish people from the Holocaust, many things. But they take their heritage, and they, they are they proud that they have come through it, and they built from there.

So, what I say to us is let's not be ashamed if our great-great-great-great-grandma had broken-up dialect and she was on a plantation because look at you now. And, and they went through what they went through so that we could be strong today. So, that's what I say to us. Let's not feel like we don't wanna talk about being from Africa, we don't wanna talk

about being slaves. Let's talk about the strength because, when you learn about what your folks have been through and how they held on and so, because of that, you are you, it will give you more strength to carry on, just like Sojourner.

EURE: Good job. I want to jump in and say the slaves [indecipherable] weren't just cotton pickers. They were very skilled workers. They didn't just go and pick up folk, so we're gonna talk about that in the future, that history of why they bought the people they bought and all the great things they did, and I'm gonna specifically focus on North Carolina because the heritage is rich.

And, and I don't know, I don't think Nathan is completely gone, but until he comes back, I'm gonna keep talking because I'm on the African American Advisory Board for the North Carolina Museum of History, and we, if you get a chance, go to UNC-TV. They just did a, and I'll, I will have it when we come back on the 30th, and I'll put it up for the, for the audience. There's a documentary made about the, the town of New Bern, and there's a lot of great history on the coast in North Carolina. And there was an underground waterway, not just the Underground Railroad.

So, Nathan, your final, and make sure you give us your contact information.

RICHARDSON: Sure, sure. There, this has been a great conversation, and I can't say too much else that what Lynnette said about, about, about that, but, but I tell you what, we, we certainly have a responsibility to ourselves. We need to understand primarily [indecipherable] rhetoric that we were slaves. I mean, when we were brought here in 1619, the first 19 Africans, were not slaves, we were Africans who were put into bondage. And so, I, in the talking of this, we have to actually teach ourselves a different type of mindset. We shouldn't say we were slaves. We were not slaves; we were Africans who were in bondage. And so, that makes a distinct difference in the mind and the psyche of the people, that there's no such thing as a slave, you know, a human being. There are humans who have been put into bondage.

So, I'm looking forward to next, the 30th, to meeting Sojourner Truth. And, and if you all want to contact me, you can, you can just google my name. I've been very blessed, extremely blessed, every year more blessed to, Frederick Douglass has actually made a tremendous impact on my life. And so, you can google my name, Nathan Richardson, and find Frederick Douglass. And you can also find my poetry. So, but my website is right there on the screen. And it was nice talking to you all.

EURE: Thank you. And I wanted you to do some poetry and Lynnette to sing, but we're gonna think about doing a clip of both of you out of character in your other worldly endeavors.

BARBER: [Indecipherable]

EURE: I think both of you are great, great talents, and I appreciate you sharing it with us today and with the community. And I look forward to seeing you on the 30th as well. And to the audience, thank you so much. We'll see you Thursday, July 30th, for the Michael Eure Show.

BARBER: Goodbye, everyone.

EURE: Goodbye.

BARBER: Thank you.

RICHARDSON: Thank you.