

An unsung hero of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

One-man show portrays Corps of Discovery's only African-American crew member

By **BRENNA VISSER**
COAST WEEKEND

There are many things to remind people who live on the coast that their home is built on the footprints of 19th century explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

But there's another set of footprints, walking right alongside the famous explorers. They belong to York, Clark's slave who was the only African-American member of the Corps of Discovery. It's a story in the shadows of the larger expedition to explore the American West, and one that North Coast resident Gideon For-mukwai believes should be brought into the light.

For the past two years, For-mukwai has been developing the one-man show "Dare to Tell: Crossing the Columbia with York." His 45-minute performance will debut 7 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 13, at the Hoffman Center for the Arts in Manzanita.

It's a show that aims to entertain as well as open up a community conversation on issues relating to equity, diversity and inclusion in today's world, he said.

"There's a lot of history in the Pacific Northwest, and I started reading extensively about Lewis and Clark. The more I read, the more interesting it became," For-mukwai said. "I thought, 'Someone needs to tell this story.' Many stories like York's are missing and need to be told."

An 'unsung hero'

For-mukwai has long been a storyteller. He has made a career out of educating businesses and students with his book, "The Science of Story Selling." But telling it in the form of a one-man show will be a new experience for him.

York's contributions to the expedition are intermittently documented throughout the Lewis and Clark journals.

Between 1804 and 1806, York was recognized as a free man and an integral crew member who helped prepare shelters, hunt game, portage around rapids and scout travel routes. Most notably, he was given power to delegate trades with Native Americans and allowed to vote on decisions.



LEFT: Gideon For-mukwai brings his one-man show about the only African-American member of the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Hoffman Center for the Arts in Manzanita on Saturday, Jan. 13. RIGHT: Gideon For-mukwai spent two years developing his show about the only African-American crew member of the Corps of Discovery.

"And despite this, he did not exploit his advantages. These small moments give us indication of the type of guy he was," For-mukwai said. "He was very unique. He refused to be stubborn. He refused to be evil."

After the expedition, York went back to a life of slavery before being freed sometime in the 1810s.

"He didn't get to go to D.C. like everyone else. Everyone else was given land, double pay. He was given nothing. He served with dignity even when things didn't end that well. He was the lowest on the totem pole yet became one of the strongest leaders."

Part of York's appeal, For-mukwai said, comes from the parallels he drew between his journey and the modern-day plight of those who contribute to a world that doesn't recognize them. Today, they work at food banks, as bus drivers, as flaggers on U.S. Highway 101.

"They are today's Yorks, and I feel there's a need to tell these stories. They're the unsung heroes," he said. "If we collectively forget, we forget the best of us."

A springboard

More than 200 years later, For-mukwai sees portraying York's story as a way to


evaluate how far society has come, and as a roadmap for where it needs to go.

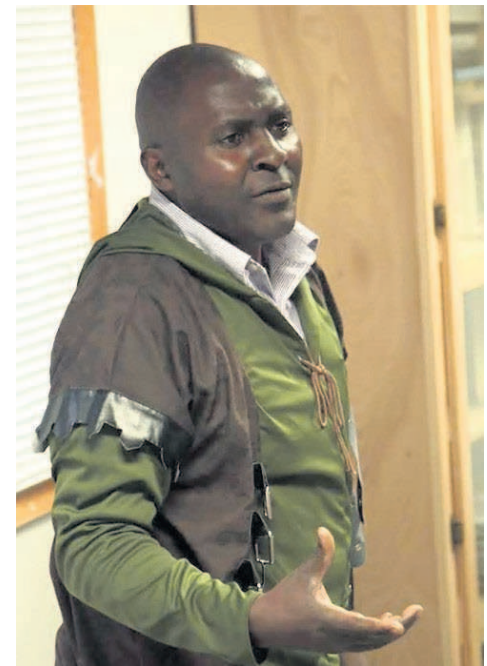
"Lewis and Clark gave permission to this man to vote. Now we ask: Are we giving people permission to be free today?" he said.

After the performance, For-mukwai hopes to lead a discussion about what people can learn from York's story and apply it to modern attempts at equity and inclusion. After living in various countries across Africa, Europe, North America and the Middle East, he believes that learning and sharing stories is what builds community.

"I recognize if I were ignorant about York, others were, too. But ignorance can't let us keep us from leading," he said. "Equity comes from recognition. It comes from knowing who is doing what."

For-mukwai said while he was particularly inspired by York, he doesn't plan to stop there. He hopes to take his show around the country, and hopefully expand his work to highlight more of history's overlooked heroes.

"They couldn't tell at the time their work would define the West. You don't know who or what will be significant. But telling these stories helps us to tell us how far we can go," he said. "Who knows whose story I will be telling next?" 



PHOTOS COURTESY GIDEON FOR-MUKWAI



North Coast resident Gideon For-mukwai decided to develop a performance centered around York, a member of the Corps of Discovery, after reading extensively about the Lewis and Clark expedition.