

# OPINION

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## Retracing the Road of Personal Freedoms

Black history is story of human courage, triumph and perseverance

BY DENISE THIMES

"I's watched the men, the women, and the children. I's seen the fright in theys eyes, asking me and wondren is theys gone make it? Is theys gonna live or die? Is theys ever gonna see day break? All the whiles I's reminding them, theys got to keep theys eyes on the star - the north star."

When I speak these words of human courage, triumph, and perseverance, I'm doing so as Harriet Tubman, arguably one of the world's most prolific 19th century freedom fighters, who after escaping slavery in the 1850s, returned to the South 20 times to guide more than 300 slaves to freedom.

Harriet Tubman was known as a "conductor," people who risked their lives to assist fugitive slaves." She is one of the strong black women that I portray in a play called "Teaching Personal Freedom." The production is part of a national campaign to build awareness about the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, which is currently under construction and will open the summer of 2004 in Cincinnati.

I've often wondered whether or not the concept of freedom had any meaning to our young people - if they realize the sacrifices so many people made for African Americans to enjoy the full fruits of freedom in this country.

Well, after my first appearance in Memphis, my apprehension vanished. When I came down the isle singing Go Down Moses, I had to fight back personal emotions to stay in character. As I gazed into the audience of boys and girls and their parents, my



Denise Thimes is Harriet Tubman in a play about the Underground Railroad and the hard won freedoms of African Americans.

eyes welled with tears at the sight of their curious and bewildered faces.

I felt as though I embodied the spirit of Harriet Tubman that night and from that point on, I felt we were truly conveying the message of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center through the play.

"By now you may know me as the Moses of my people. Some say that I am the mother of freedom, but tonight, I want you to think of me as the first teacher of personal freedom."

The production, which began in mid January in Memphis, was well received in New Orleans and Detroit as well. By the time we reached Detroit, I was even more convinced that I had made the right decision to be one of the conductors of personal freedoms. To see the enthusiastic reaction we get from people who come out in cold weather to hear this powerful message, is more

gratifying than any performance I've ever done.

Our people must never forget

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that to make sure freedom is kept alive, it must be passed down to our children. It's still our responsibility as mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and aunts and uncles to teach them the valuable lessons of freedom. No one else is responsible for that. We must let them know

that they have a voice in this world, and that they matter.

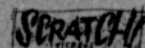
"Out of the huts of history's shame I rise. Up from a past that's rooted in pain I rise. Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave. I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise, I rise, I rise."

Denise Thimes is a St. Louis-based singer and award winning theatrical performer with the St. Louis Black Repertory Theater Co. She is a graduate of Spelman College in Atlanta, where she studied music and theater, and is the mother of two.

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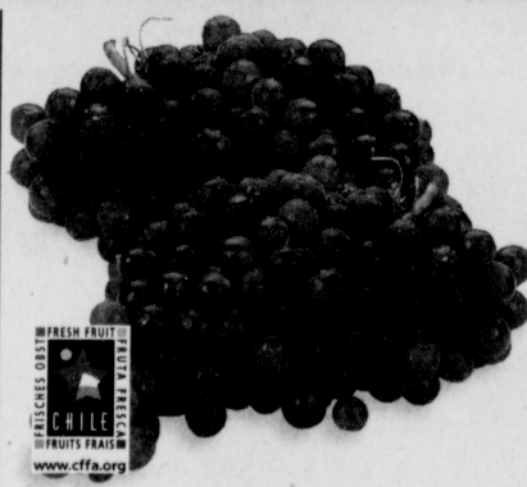
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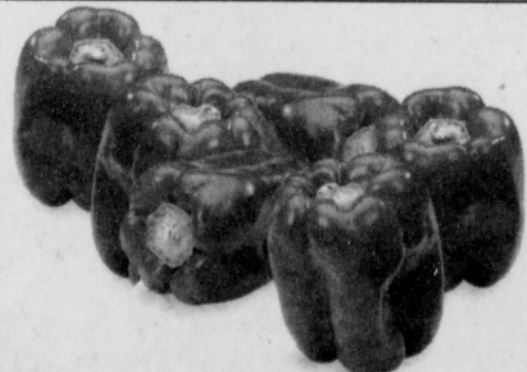
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