

# COURAGEOUS

AFRICAN AMERICANS



by Ron Weber

## Prodigal Child Shocks America

Hundreds of years of books, diaries, articles, oral history and more tell us of giant heroes of our past. However, they are not always as physically big as one might imagine. One case of point is the huge impact a frail African child born around 1753, would have on this world.

At not much more than 25 pounds, Phillis Wheatley arrived in America aboard a slave ship. She was barely strong enough to stand on her own as the auctioneer slammed the hammer down. A rich businessman's wife, Susan Wheatley, took pity on the sickly girl that day in a Boston harbor. The year was 1761.

At around seven years old, dirty, painfully ill from the long journey from Senegal, Africa, the child was small for her age and hardly a bargain for any slave owner. We can only imagine how frightened she was after being forced on to a slave ship weeks before, and now standing half-naked in rags, facing a crowd of screaming slave bidders.

But Susan Wheatley and her husband, John Wheatley had other plans. In time she would be allowed to help around the house doing chores like the other Wheatley children, but for now, the toothless starving little girl would be given clothes to replace her torn rags, food, shelter, and most importantly, a combination of religion and education. Consequently, as a young woman, Phillis, who was named after the ship she came to America on, found recognition for her writings.

Due to her almost fairytale life, Wheatley often said that she felt "saved" from a life of poverty,

starvation, and sickness in Africa. Her coming to America and being taught Christianity had a profound affect on her life and her writings.

John Wideman in his book, "My Soul Has Grown Deep," tells us "Wheatley truly felt her capture and enslavement as the work of a merciful God, rescuing her from a land she called pagan."



Phillis Wheatley

As Wheatley's poetry continued to be published, Americans were both fascinated and shocked at her eloquent vocabulary. When people began to think she was a fake, high-ranking government officials, including the governor of the colony in which Boston resided, stepped in and validated the work.

Upon reading Wheatley's 1770 poem, *On the Death of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield* the English Countess of Huntington was so impressed that she later wrote Wheatley and invited her to London. Wheatley was so well

received in Europe that the Countess helped her publish her first multiple works, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. After its publication in 1773, she became the first published American black poet, male or female.

Sadly, her mistress died in 1774 and her master John Wheatley died four years later in 1778. As a result, Wheatley was forced into poverty and sold as a slave. Although she met and married John Peters, life did not turn out in her favor. Peters was an irritable man who rarely found work and primarily relied on Wheatley for a means of support. Wheatley worked as a servant during the day and tried to keep up her writing at night. Wheatley gave birth to three children, losing all of them during the birth. She died along with her third child on Dec 5, 1784.

Although her tragic end was a great loss to her devoted audience, Wheatley left behind an unparalleled legacy. While some feel she was kidnapped from Africa to be sold as a slave, most historical accounts support the belief that her destitute Senegalese mother paid to have her hidden on the ship as a stow-away, hoping she would find a better life in America.

Her worldwide fame and elaborate writings gave hope to scores of others who may never have become writers if not for Wheatley. For 200 years after her passing, Wheatley clubs throughout the country held on to her legacy, proving that no matter who you are, where you come from, or what horrible circumstances surrounded you, you can achieve greatness.

# EL OBSERVADOR

## Families Urged to Buckle Up

Program 'Corazon de mi vida' targets Latinos

(AP) — While child safety-seat use in general is at an all-time high, the message to keep kids buckled up has not taken hold in Hispanic communities, where cultural differences and lack of understanding about seat belt laws.

As the U.S. Latino population grows, federal officials are working to teach Hispanics about the benefits of child safety seats.

A program, "Corazon de mi vida," or "You are the center of my life," has distributed child safety seats in Hispanic communities. The program, a collaboration between the federal National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the San Antonio-based National Latino

Children's Institute, is a start in breaking down the cultural barriers that have led to more deaths among Hispanic children than non-Hispanic white children.

"We're having to totally educate this community, totally change this behavior not just because you're going to get a ticket but because you will save your child's life," said program director Irene Rodriguez.

Julio Rios, who supervises Hispanic programs for Child and Family Services of West Michigan, Inc., said immigrants are often surprised to learn every state requires infants to be placed in child seats. Many come from countries with no such

requirement. Even those that do require seat belts, such as Ecuador and Honduras, rarely enforce the law, Rios said.

Many new parents of all races and ethnicities believe, wrongly, that safety seats cost hundreds of dollars, Rodriguez said. She noted that a good safety seat can be as little as \$40. Even when parents have safety seats, she said, the vast majority use them incorrectly.

Rodriguez said her program appeals to the importance of family in Hispanic culture and uses traditional rhymes and riddles to help parents remember to buckle children in the back seat.

## Group Mana Fights World Hunger

(AP) — The Grammy-winning Mexican rock group Mana will provide music and a little diplomacy on their latest U.S. tour.

The musicians were recently named goodwill ambassadors for the United Nation's Food and Agricultural Organization and will donate \$1 from every ticket sold on the tour to the group.

"Mana will help FAO's message to reach younger, active audiences in Latin America, the United States and Europe," said FAO director Jacques Diouf in a recorded statement at the group's press conference in Los Angeles.

Mana's lead singer, Fher Olvera, called the appointment "a great honor," and lauded the organization not only for feeding people around the world but for helping communities create their own food supplies.



The Mexican rock group Mana will help feed the hungry as U.N. ambassadors.

The pop group, often referred to as Latin America's U2, also urged record companies and stores to lower the price of CDs so that fans "wouldn't be forced to buy bad

quality, pirated copies." Mana's "Revolucion de Amor," won a Latin Grammy this year for best rock album by a duo or group with vocal.

## Spanish On-Line Services Launched

(AP) — Tienes e-mail. America Online has launched a service for the burgeoning market of U.S. households where Spanish is mostly or exclusively spoken. In addition to the familiar "you've got mail" greeting, the AOL Latino service is wholly

in Spanish, down to the instructions on installation CDs.

The U.S. Hispanic population, the country's largest minority group, has grown over the past two years at nearly four times the rate of the overall population. Online in-

formation outlets have responded.

Yahoo! Inc. already has a "Yahoo! En Espanol" site with news, maps and even greeting cards in Spanish, while Microsoft Corp.'s MSN has acquired the Spanish-language Yupi portal.

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