

## EPIC Final Paper For Storytelling Certificate

### How to Put on A One Person Show

#### Motivation

What interests you? What person in history are you passionate about? If you could spend a day with this person, what would they be doing? If you could give this person an award, what should it be for?

My topic for my one person show was “The Amazing Harriet Tubman.” She inspired me to keep my faith strong, to overcome obstacles, to not sit back and wait on others to do the work God has ordained. This woman was remarkable from childhood as a slave, as a runaway slave and as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, through her life as a spy for the Civil War and through her senior years, fighting for women's rights and caring for others.

Thomas Garrett, a Quaker said “For in truth, I have never met with any person, of any color, who had more confidence in the voice of God as spoken direct to her soul. She has frequently told me that she talked with God and He talked with her everyday of her life and she has declared to me that she felt no more fear of being arrested by her former master or any other person, when in his immediate neighborhood, than she did in the state of New York or Canada, for she said she never ventured only where God sent her, and her faith in the Supreme Power truly was great.”

#### Research

Once I decided whose life I wanted to portray, I visited my local library and found books in the children’s section because I can quickly read them and discover highlights of that person’s life. I renewed these books for many months. I used post it labels to mark what I want to use in my performance. I asked the librarian to help me find adult books on the person and on her computer, we searched the lists at other libraries. Those books were sent to the library and I picked them up a few days later. The two or three books that I used the most post it labels, I bought on line or through my local bookstore. I highlighted and wrote comments in the margin to help me in presenting this story. For eighteen years, I’ve told many variations of the Life of Harriet Tubman.

1. My main source of information is from *Harriet Tubman, Imagining A Life* by Beverly Lowry. Before each season of this performance, I read through the book and my marginal notes.

2. *Harriet Tubman: Antislavery Activist* by M.J. Taylor

3. *The Story of Harriet Tubman, Conductor of the Underground Railroad* by Kate McMullan

4. *Who Was Harriet Tubman?* by Yona Zeldis McDonough

5. *From Slavery to Freedom with Harriet Tubman* by Deborah Hedstrom

Over the years, I gave a shorter version of this presentation to elementary school assemblies, in classrooms and at the Berkeley Marsh Theater. The school assemblies were mostly paid. I paid a friend \$50.00 to video tape my performances at the Marsh. He placed it on YouTube at Linda D. Wright’s performances and he gave me a hard copy. I listened to the Youtube performance before this performance. Recently, I story told at the West Portal Library in San Francisco. I voice recorded it so I can listen to it on my phone. The YouTube and the voice recorder helps me evaluate my performance.

Was I clear? What did I forget, accuracy of facts, how can I improve... At first was embarrassing to hear and see me but it was important to push past those uncomfortable feelings and use these tools regularly. I typed up my recordings so I have a written copy to study. My writer's group gave me a good critique. I also placed Harriet Tubman's name into the search bar of YouTube and found hours of information. A good headphone with Bluetooth capability was invaluable because it allowed me to watch YouTube or listen to my voice recording hands free while I cooked, cleaned or walked the dog.

I visited Auburn New York, where Harriet Tubman lived and died. I explored the house William Seward, the Secretary of State under Abraham Lincoln, gave to Harriet Tubman, William Seward's house and Harriet Tubman's grave site. When I spoke of their friendship, I spoke with passion and authority because I have seen it. I walked through William Seward's kitchen that still looks like the kitchen run away slaves sat in to eat. Walking where Harriet Tubman walked, connected me more with Harriet Tubman's essence, her life and her faith. One day I plan to visit Dorchester County Maryland, Baltimore, and the African American Museum in DC and another museum in Dorchester County, Maryland where Harriet Tubman was raised.

#### Educate

A friend asked me 'Can you describe yourself in one word?' It took me weeks to answer. One day it hit me. *I am an educator. That is who I am at my core.* In high school, my history essays were in a storytelling format. I wrote letters between women in England to friends who had migrated to America. Those letters told the story of the American Revolution, the Civil War, slavery and so forth.

I made display boards to go with my story. Years ago, In New York City, at the National Park for African American Burial Grounds, I found a wonderful package of material to make a display board about Harriet Tubman. At home, I went to the office supply store, bought a tri - fold display board and double sided sticking tape and put that bad boy together.

On the streets of Harlem, a man was selling beautiful paintings and one was of Harriet Tubman leading runaway slaves through a swamp. I bought it for \$10. At home I had it mounted for \$15 and I displayed it on a stand. I added a few battery powered candles around them to create a special atmosphere of respect and awe.

At another museum I found a small replica of a cannon used during the Civil War. I found a replica of an old covered wagon on the free table at work. It showed the audience one way conductors on the Underground Railroad hid runaway slaves as they drove them to the next safe house. At work, the librarian gave me a huge picture of Abraham Lincoln. His picture helped set the time frame for the audience.

During a visit to Washington DC, I bought copies of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Declaration of Independence that were printed on parchment paper. The children were amazed at this. They thought they were the real copies.

The main people I referred to, I found their image on the internet. I took screenshots on my smartphone, sent the images to Costco Photo Center and they printed various size pictures for a small fee. I had each picture laminated at Office Max.

Whenever I traveled to the Midwest or to the east coast, I asked the volunteers at the travel centers if they have any paperwork, tours, or museums about slavery, the Underground Railroad, the Civil War, and segregation. I have found more information through them.

#### Time and Place

I decided where and when I wanted to perform. March 10, 1913 was the day Harriet Tubman died. I wanted to perform my first solo show where I lived as a gift to the city. I chose the library and not my church (where it would be free) because I wanted a neutral place, central location and the price was not too high. The library required a \$50 deposit and \$30.00 per hour. I met with a librarian and March 11 was available.

### Publicity

Three days later, I visited the library and confirmed the date. Then I ordered the invitations. A friend had taken professional pictures of me in my backyard and I used one. I searched the Costco Photo Center for invitations. They were \$14.95 for fifty. I found the one I liked and uploaded the picture. When it was done the next day, I handed them out at church, the gym, stores, family, neighbors, meetings I attended, Stagebridge, Instagram, Facebook, the four schools I work at, current and past co workers, and mailed some too.

The library did not sponsor my event which means my posters could not be displayed with the library's advertisements nor be put in their public calendar. Shopping at Office Max, I bought see through frames on stands. On the day of the performance, I put my invitation in the frames and displayed it outside the library. My daughter Kenya, put them in the library too.

I asked Kenya to take pictures during the event. I instructed her on how to hold her phone. Newspapers want smartphones to be held longways - horizontally for picture taking because the picture fits the newspaper page better.

### Newspaper

I read the newspaper and made certain of the email address and sent in a small paragraph about the event. It was published in the paper for two weeks before the show. Most papers have a community calendar page. Next time I will send a notice to the Vallejo Times Herald and to Benicia Happenings, an online community calendar.

### The Venue

I checked out the room and decided where the front would be. I wanted the audience's back to be to the entrance door so they won't be distracted by people coming and going. I studied my 'back story'. What will the audience see behind me? At one school, I had a friend videotape the assembly being careful not to include students in it but the piano close to me was piled high with junk. That video could not be used.

At the library, there was a lovely fireplace with the American flag on one side and the Bear flag on the other. A painting of Dona Benicia was hung above the fireplace. I might use painters tape and cover it with a huge picture of Abraham Lincoln. But I liked the picture of Dona Benicia. It was painted during Harriet Tubman's lifetime. It fitted the time of my story. I thought about it for awhile and decided to leave it uncovered because I didn't want trouble with the librarians.

### Coaching

Before the Berkeley Marsh performance, Kirk Waller, the Storytelling Director for Stagebridge coached me, helping me be ready for the stage. The Stagebridge advanced class critiqued my Harriet Tubman performance too. This year, Jeanne Haynes coached me. We changed the setting from Harriet Tubman talking to her extended family (the audience) to a 90th birthday party. Jeanne Haynes helped me with many details: when do I show the audience the laminated 16 X 20 pictures of the house William Seward gave to Harriet and the other picture Harriet's grave site? Her advice was to show the pictures at the end, after the applause. It would be a distraction to show it on the display tables before the performance because the audience would have difficulty seeing Harriet as a slave if they see the beautiful two story house in the beginning of the story. Jeanne Haynes made sure I answered pertinent questions

within the performance - what was slavery, why was it wrong, how did it feel to be a slave, and what was the Underground Railroad. She made sure I conveyed what it felt like to be a slave. She also coached me when to sit and take a sip of tea. Both Kirk and Jeanne were excellent coaches. Mary Gay Ducey has not heard me share this story but she encouraged me by saying, "This is a story that needs to be told."

### Practice

*Practice makes perfect!* I listened to YouTube and to my voice recorder on walks and while driving. I re-read my book on Harriet Tubman. I practiced in front of a mirror. This helped me critique my gestures, expressions and stance. As I got into the story, I lose awareness of the mirror.

I ate lightly on March 11 before the performance because my energy went to the performance and not digesting food. Afterwards, I ate!

### Costume

I wore a dressy long black skirt, top, jacket and pearl necklace and earrings for Harriet Tubman's 90 birthday party. When I showed one of my fourth grade students the newspaper article of the event, her first comment was "You look like you're going to a funeral!" Well, soon I will order a black skirt and jacket with a white blouse worn in the 1910 era. Harriet Tubman mostly wore black like a Quaker but there were times she dressed up in silks as a disguise when she was on the run.

### Master of Ceremonies

I asked my husband Randy to introduce the event at 3:05 PM. I typed what I wanted him to say. Jeanne Haynes coaching included having the emcee walk to my displays on the side tables and talk to the audience about some pertinent details - what states fought for the Confederate, which fought for the Union and the location of the state of Maryland and the city of Philadelphia. Setting was important for the audience.

### Sound System

The library had a sound system, but I did not trust it. I bought a light weight sound system through the worship leader at my church. He gave me a stand for the speaker. My sound system had a connection for a flash drive.

I asked a friend, Rob Barnard, to put four songs from YouTube about Harriet Tubman on a flash drive so they can be played before and after the performance. The flash drive connected to the sound system. That worked well.

### Set Up and Take Down Crew

Several weeks before the performance, I asked several friends and family to come to the library early to help set up chairs. I rented the room from 2:30-4:30. We arrived at 2:10 and had no problem getting into the room early. Everybody showed up on time! My dear friend, Susan Nuss, an interior decorator, took my Rubbermaid container filled with supplies and she went to work decorating the stage. Susan covered the container with a bright quilt sewed by my step mother-in-law, a tea pot, cup and saucer, flowers and a napkin. Susan draped a crocheted shawl that I had made in high school over the back of my chair and placed a pillow in the chair so that I would be slightly elevated. This way the audience would see me better when I sit down. I did consider making a stand to put chair and table on but that needed to have been delegated several months ago. So the pillow sufficed.

I brought black sheets with me because of the ‘back story’ mentioned earlier. Those sheets have covered up messy distractions on the side or back of stages. This day, Susan used them to cover a painting easel. She placed the painting of Harriet Tubman leading runaway slaves through a swamp to freedom, on the covered easel and draped another quilt that my grandmother-in-law had quilted decades ago on one side of the easel. Abraham Lincoln’s picture hung on the front of a podium placed on the side of the room. Two long tables, covered with ethnic material, held my two display boards. The candles, wagon, and cannon were placed in front of them.

One friend set up the speaker on its stand. Rob Barnard set up the video equipment. Kenya and my husband Randy set up chairs being careful to keep a certain color pattern. There were two color of chairs.

My daughter Karis surprised me by driving down from Humboldt State University - its a five hour drive. She helped whoever needed it.

#### Face Book Live

Kenya made a stand from boxes and covered it with material. She used my phone and recorded it on Facebook live. Go to Linda Wright on Facebook. Friends in other parts of the country were able to watch and comment.

#### The Show

Some came early. But we were ready. By 3PM most of the chairs were taken. Five children under the age of 11 were in the audience along with forty adults. I sat on the side, deep breathing, remembering my opening lines. The audience was with me, even the children. I did involve each of the children by asking “Who is five years old?” One child raised her hand. “At five, I wasn’t going to school, no, no, no. It was a crime for a slave to be learning how to read and to write. I was put on the back of Mr. Cook’s horse and we drove far away from my Mama. I didn’t see her for many months. I was hired out to be his slave.”

“How many of you are six or seven?” Another child raised her hand. I told her what my life was like at that age.

“How many of you are 10, 11 or 12? A boy raised his hand. I told him about the injury to my head at that age.

At 4PM, I closed the performance. There was applause and afterwards I asked my daughter Karis to come up. She had the two big pictures. I asked for a volunteer to help hold the pictures and Isley Tashombe, my great niece raised her hand and came up and spoke with the audience. She told them about her birthday. I thought *this child is stealing my show!* But she held up the picture.

When they sat down, I answered questions from the audience. More applause. I talked to members of the audience and thanked them for coming. Each was very appreciative. Many saw it in the newspaper or saw my invitation in town. Two children, Tommie and Maggie Liu came forward to see my tea pot and cup. I heard Maggie whisper, “What was she really drinking?” Tommy said to his sister “Its tea all right.” Whenever I sat down, I poured tea and drank it. All eyes were on me, focused, waiting and watching. Family and friends came. It was a good day.

#### Post Publicity

My friend, Stephanie Liu works for the Fairfield library. She enjoyed the performance and so did her two children. Outside the room, in the main part of the library, Stephanie went to the librarians on

duty and told them she was upset that the library did not sponsor my storytelling. She told them they should have paid me.

A little while later, the librarian came hurrying into the room and told me that if I ever want to use the room for storytelling, the library will sponsor it. I won't have to pay to rent the room. That was a major victory!

That evening, I asked Kenya to show me the pictures she took. I asked her to email five of the pictures to the Benicia Herald. The editor will select one from the bunch. She typed a brief caption for each picture and that the photos were taken by Kenya Wright. The newspaper editor liked the pictures with children in them. The editor chose the picture of me looking at my great niece, Isley holding the picture of Harriet Tubman's house and my daughter Karis, holding the picture of Harriet Tubman's gravesite. This was a first for Kenya's name to be listed as photographer in the newspaper and a first for Isley to be in any newspaper. I predict Isley will be in many more newspapers by the ease she came forward and spoke! A few days later, I was down at the newspaper buying six copies for grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts! They all had to have a picture of Isley.

#### Gratitude

I sent thank you notes to the library, thanking them for giving me the opportunity to portray Harriet Tubman's life as a gift to the Benicia community and for offering to sponsor future storytelling times. For the six children who came and I know them, I wanted to give them Harriet Tubman finger puppets but the local bookstore was out of them.

Thank you Stagebridge staff and instructors for making this EPIC two year training possible. I was able to take at least one class from the four instructors: Kirk Waller, Olga Loya, Mary Gay Ducey and Jeanne Haynes, plus attend the week long workshop with Olga Loya and MaryJo and the Saturday workshop with Willie Claflin, Joel ben Izzy, and Nancy Wang from Eth-noh-Tec. Thank you very much. Its been a very fulfilling journey. Truly, an EPIC experience.