Sleeping Like A Slave At Belle Grove Helps Promote Healing, Understanding

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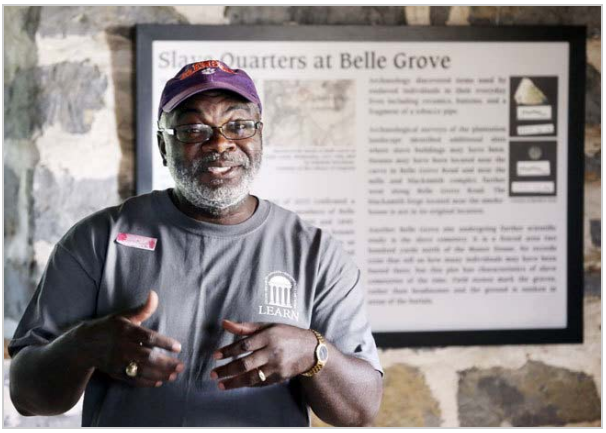
MIDDLETOWN — Spending the night on the floor where slaves once slept and wearing slave shackles has made Terry James a better person.



Joseph McGill Jr., founder of The Slave Dwelling Project, speaks Sunday in the slave quarters of Belle Grove Plantation near Middletown. (Photo by Scott Mason/The Winchester Star)

He shared his experiences with The Slave Dwelling Project on Sunday at Belle Grove Plantation near Middletown.

James, project founder Joseph McGill, Belle Grove executive director Kristen Laise and students from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania were among those who slept on the brick floor of the plantation's lower level Saturday night.

The Hite family, who built Belle Grove in the late 1700s, owned 276 slaves over the years, Laise told the roughly 25 people who were gathered to learn about the project.

Joseph McGill Jr., founder of The Slave Dwelling Project, speaks Sunday in the slave quarters of Belle Grove Plantation near Middletown. (Photo by Scott Mason/The Winchester Star)

McGill said he has stayed in slave dwellings in 17 states and Washington, D.C. To the surprise of many, some of those states are in the North.

"I came up with this crazy idea about six years ago," McGill said.

He was a Civil War re-enactor and worked for the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

"They do a beautiful job in preserving places like this," McGill said of the National Trust. "They also do a beautiful job in going beyond that story and telling the other stories associated with some of these spaces. Personally, I didn't think they were going far enough."

He has now slept in more than 100 slave quarters.

When Florence, S.C., resident James first heard about McGill's idea, he was skeptical.

"I thought about it for a while," James said. "I'm from enslaved folks from South Carolina. My

great-great-great-grandfather, Ervin James, was an enslaved man."

James decided to participate in the project as a way to honor his ancestors, who had survived the brutal passage across the Atlantic.

He took out a pair of shackles and passed it around the audience.

"I've got well over 40 sites down, and I've shackled down every night," James said. "I did that to honor them and to get a sense of how it was to be enslaved, and to be stacked and packed like sardines and cattle on a slave ship that was hot as heck, air quality poor."

While lying on his back in a slave dwelling, he said he'd look at the moon and stars through cracks in the roof and think about what slaves had to endure just to survive.

"[The Slave Dwelling Project] helps us to try and put names with the people who were enslaved there, make them human," James said. "Really, this project has made me a better person because I'm able to see the whole picture now of what it was to be enslaved and not to harbor any bitterness toward people.

"This project, it helps us to talk about the issues we're dealing with as a nation still. This project helps us have a discussion about an issue or a subject that we really don't want to talk about. We've got to move out of the comfort zone."

People don't tend to expect "white-haired white ladies" to sleep on brick, dirt or wood floors, said Prinny Anderson, who is on the board of directors of The Slave Dwelling Project.

She is descended from dozens of slave-owning families, including that of Thomas Jefferson, who fathered children with one of his slaves.

"Twice now, I've had the opportunity to sleep at Monticello with my cousins," Anderson said.

She said she was the only white Jefferson descendant there.

"We haven't always been comfortable in acknowledging that relationship and that history," Anderson said.

During her elementary and high school education, Bloomsburg student Jolene Drum said she learned nothing of the slave experience.

"Because it's silenced, it's not spoken of, it's tough to talk about," she said. "My freshman year [in college] I took African-American history because I wanted to take it upon myself to learn about what has been silenced."

Another student, Marqeshay Tomlinson, talked about what it was like sleeping on the floor at Belle Grove.

"It touches me to know that the descendants of slave owners are open to discovery and feel comfortable to talk about how it bothers them," she said. "It just lets me know that it's not something that's just thrown in the dark. Throughout the whole trip, the part that made me really, really emotional was the part when I held the shackles in my hand."

Lynda Davis shared some information about Coming to the Table, a project that grew out of the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg. It was started by descendants of slaves and slave owners and works toward healing the wounds of racism.

The Shenandoah Valley Chapter of Coming to the Table is having a dialogue about restorative justice on Nov. 5 at Handley Library in Winchester.

For more information about The Slave Dwelling Project, visit slavedwellingproject.org.

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