

# The Evansville Courier & Press

## *He brings explorer York's story to life*

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He stood in front of Evansville Day School students recently, clad in a felt hat and beaded Blackfoot Indian-style clothing that was purposely flawed - flawed because the Blackfoot believe only God is perfect.

He pointed his walking stick like a rifle, showed how he faced down a grizzly and grinned, "We ate like kings that night."

If you didn't know better, you'd think 36-year-old attorney Hasan Davis of Berea, Ky., really was York, the slave who accompanied William Clark and Meriwether Lewis on their expedition from St. Louis to the Pacific Ocean and back in 1804-1806. Preliminary planning for the trip took place in 1803, when the group passed through the Evansville area.

Davis, who'll appear at the Victorian Chautauqua in Jeffersonville, Ind., Saturday, told of nearly starving in the snowy mountains and being greeted as "big medicine" by Indians who had never seen a black man before, including a one-eyed chief who tried to rub the black off him.

He spoke of the camaraderie of the three dozen soldiers and civilians who made the perilous journey at the behest of President Thomas Jefferson - and the shame he felt when Clark and co-commander Lewis gave trinkets to the Indians and told them they were going to be part of a bigger tribe, Americans.

But more than anything else, Davis - an actor during his undergraduate days at Berea College - told the story of why York deserves a role in history that he's been denied until recently.

Louisville, Ky., is planning a York statue on its riverfront as part of this year's 200th Lewis and Clark anniversary, and Bill Clinton in the waning days of his presidency made York an "honorary sergeant" in the expedition.

"With skin as black as coal, I walked side by side and suffered pain for pain with the greatest heroes this country has ever seen," Davis said, in character.

As Clark's slave who had been living in Louisville, York wasn't even an official member of the party but for nearly three years lived the life of a free man. When Jefferson later feted the explorers in Washington, D.C., every man got 300 acres and gold coins. York was back in slave quarters and got nothing.

Clark, who treated York almost as an equal during the voyage, even letting him vote on where to camp, couldn't understand why York later requested his freedom - something Clark denied him until around 1816.

Clark wanted York to live with him in St. Louis and to forget about the wife and family he'd left behind in Louisville. York's family was sent to the South with another master, never to be seen again, even though York searched for them.

Clark told writer Washington Irving in 1832 that York had died of cholera in Tennessee, but Davis believes stories told years later by trappers who met an old black man in the Colorado mountains who spoke English and had become a tribal chief with the Crow Indians.

Ironically, Davis hated history as a child growing up on welfare - and with dyslexia - in Atlanta: "I'd been expelled from every school. Whenever I opened a history book about great things that happened in this country, I never saw anybody like me."

A strong mother and a will to save himself from a life of gangs enabled him to literally run away in the 1980s to Berea, a college that takes disadvantaged students willing to work for their education.

Today, Davis, who earned his law degree from the University of Kentucky and whose wife works in administration at Berea, gives empowerment workshops and heads Kentucky's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee.

But for the past year and a half, he's also traveled far and wide portraying York, having studied him from the million or so words written in the journals kept by Lewis and Clark's party.

"I wanted to do something substantial and yet be able to entertain," he says. "This is a passionate story, a great way to learn history."

He grabs kids' attention first with the adventure part, slowly weaving in subtle commentary so his audience comes to understand "the rich diversity and rich sacrifices all of us made." He works to show that everyone should be allowed to embrace the American dream.

At one point, looking at some second- and third-graders, he described how York spent hours watching whales frolic in the Pacific Ocean, which only made him realize how much he wanted the freedom to look a white man in the eye once they got back to the land of bathtubs and perfume.

"My name is York, just York, the same name my daddy carried before me," he finally told the Day School students. "I tell you all this so that when I'm gone from here, my name, my story, doesn't die ... truth is the only thing of value I have left to give you."

