

The News-Enterprise -

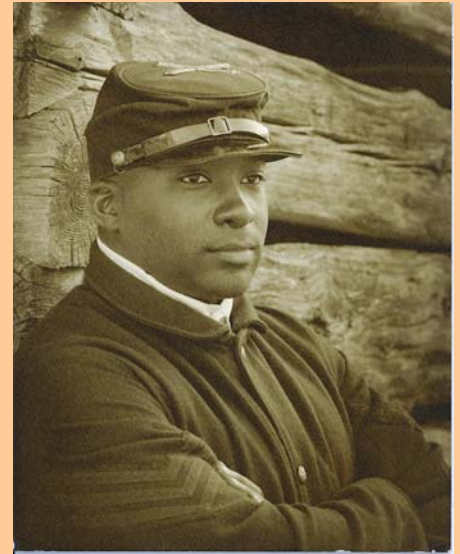
Serving Hardin County, Kentucky

Looking backward to move forward

By SARAH J. BAKER

Actor Hasan Davis reflected on what it meant to be an American and pondered whose sacrifices bettered the country. "Quite often, African-Americans feel they don't have a voice in that conversation," he said. That thought set Davis' course to uncover stories of black heroes who impacted the people around them. Davis will bring one hero, Angus Augustus "A. A." Burleigh, to life when he performs "Long Climb to Freedom" at the State Theater Friday.

"There really are no limits except the limits we put on ourselves, and I think Burleigh exemplifies that," Davis said. Burleigh was born a free man in 1848. But after his father died, he and his mother were forced into slavery in Kentucky. At 16, Burleigh escaped to join thousands of black soldiers fighting the Civil War, Davis said.



After the war, Burleigh went on to become one of the first black graduates of Berea College. He became a teacher and minister. In 1888, he was appointed chaplain of the Illinois State senate. "He must have made quite an impact to be given that position at that time," Davis said.

Davis discovered Burleigh's story at Berea College, which he also attended. Berea College was founded as an interracial school six years before the Civil War started. "I figured a place like this would have incredible stories of the American dream," Davis said. "He really struck me to be a unique opportunity to show the development of a person through all those stages," he said of his character.

Brad Mertens, performing arts chairman at the State Theater, said he was immediately impressed with Davis' work and recruited him for Friday's performance. "He's done extensive research for his character," Mertens said. "I think he has a real connection, perhaps a personal connection, with the character he portrays."

Davis, like Burleigh, has transformed his life. Growing up in Atlanta, Davis was one of four children raised in poverty by his single mother. At an early age, he was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder and dyslexia. He ran with the "wrong crowd," was arrested at age 11 and expelled from school at 18.

If you go

Hasan Davis will present "Long Climb to Freedom" at 7:30 p.m. Friday at the State Theater. Tickets cost \$10. To reserve tickets, call 234-8258.

He earned a GED and moved to Kentucky to attend Berea College. After being expelled from the college twice, "I decided it was time for me to be somewhere else," he said. Eventually, he talked his way back into Berea. He was still considered a sophomore when he entered the school for the third time. By graduation, Davis had turned around. He was elected student body president and homecoming king and became a standout performer in the school's theater department.

"With my attention deficit and dyslexia I figured I should go to law school, which didn't make sense to anyone," Davis said. Even his college counselor advised him not to set such high goals, but doubts just pushed him closer to law school. Three and a half years later, Davis had earned a law degree from the University of Kentucky. He returned to Berea College to work as an admissions counselor and assistant director of the school's black cultural center. Upon his return, he revived his college passion the performing arts.

As he considered possible characters for his act, Burleigh's range of experiences attracted him. He also adopted York, a slave who traveled west with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Davis presented York's story to the Hardin County Historical Society last fall. "Though I love Shakespeare and the classics, I thought it would be interesting to tell real stories about people who gave themselves to make this country," he said.

Outside performing, Davis now chairs the Kentucky Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, serves on the board of the National Coalition for Juvenile Justice and is vice president of the Boys and Girls Club of Madison County.

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