

# Owen Sound Emancipation Committee Fundraiser: Leslie McCurdy Performs *The Spirit of Harriet Tubman and Things My Fore-Sisters Saw*

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On October 22, 2011, at the Roxy Theatre in Owen Sound I, along with Emancipation Festival organizers, Grey Roots staff and volunteers, and other members of the community, viewed two plays called *The Spirit of Harriet Tubman* and *Things My Fore-Sisters Saw*. The evening began with opening remarks from MC Blaine Courtney of the annual Owen Sound Emancipation Festival and a few words from Owen Sound Mayor, Deb Haswell. There was a brief overview of the plans for the 2012 Emancipation Festival's upcoming 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary and some fundraising draws for future Emancipation events. Musical entertainment was provided by the Bobby Dean Blackburn band.

Soon we were right into *The Spirit of Harriet Tubman*. Leslie McCurdy, as Tubman, tells a life-spanning story from the perspective of a seven-year-old slave girl in 1820, right up to nearly one hundred years of age. She talks of escaping slavery and travelling from the United States to Canada, and reveals how she later on helped others to escape, fought for the rights of women, and started a homeless shelter in New York state.

The next play, *Things My Fore-Sisters Saw*, tells the stories of four women of African descent who brought tremendous social change within Canada in their own respective eras.

Marie –Joseph Angelique was a slave owned by François Poulin de Francheville, Seigneur de Saint-Maurice and a Montreal merchant in the 1730s. She was expected to have sexual relations with male slaves and also her master. Marie –Joseph aspired to find her freedom and have a relationship with a lover of her own choice, Claude Thibault. On April 10, 1734 she learned she was about to be sold to someone else. Allegedly, in a fit of extreme fear and anger, she retaliated and set fire to the slave owner's home. Forty six buildings, including L'hotel Dieu hospital, were destroyed, although no lives were lost. Marie-Joseph tried to escape, but was captured. Eventually there was a trial in accordance with the French justice system. The chief investigator made life very difficult for her until she was forced to admit guilt under torture. June 21, 1734 was her execution day, but Anquelique was first driven through the streets in full view on a scavengers cart with a sign saying "arsonist" and with ropes tied around her. At the church Place D'Armes, she was forced to kneel down and beg forgiveness. Her hand was severed.

Mary Ann Shadd was born on October 9, 1823 in Wilmington, Delaware, USA. She was the oldest of thirteen children. Her parents, Harriet and Abraham Shadd, were in the free Black community



*Leslie McCurdy performs as  
Harriet Tubman*

and her father was a key figure in the Underground Railroad. Mary Ann witnessed the family's attempts to help free slaves and bring change. In 1856, she married Thomas F. Cary of Toronto. They had two children, Sarah and Linton, and lived in Chatham, where Mary Ann worked at her newspaper and taught school. Thomas died in 1860 and, after the decline of her newspaper, Mary Ann went back to Washington. There she served as a recruiting officer for the Union Army while promoting Black nationalism. She also worked as a teacher and principal. Mary Ann graduated from Howard University School of Law in 1881 and was the first female lawyer in the United States. As she reported in her newspaper, "Self-reliance is the Fine Road to Independence."

Rose Fortune (1774-1864) was a notable figure on the docks of Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia. Strong in spirit, she stood her ground, defending and safeguarding the property of others.

Viola Desmond was a very successful Halifax beautician and businesswoman. While in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, she wanted to pass the evening at a show which was playing at the Roseland Theatre. However, because she was Black, she was told she wouldn't be seated in the downstairs, but was segregated to the balcony section. Desmond sat downstairs in spite of the "no Blacks" rule and was arrested. The charge: allegedly defrauding the government of the 1 percent amusement tax on the higher priced downstairs seating. She was thrown in jail for 12 hours, fined \$20.00, and sentenced to 30 days in prison.

Leslie McCurdy plays each of these dynamic women. Always visible to the audience, she utilizes a trunk from which she takes out various items of clothing and props, putting on layer over layer to create each character. She tells of the common struggle to make enough money to live and support dependents, while reaching out to others in the community. At the same time each woman is driven by an inner knowledge that she should be equal and free.