

Walk in her Footsteps - E3

[00:00:00] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** I decided I have the right to two things in life and that's liberty or death, and I'm bound to have one of them.

[00:00:16] **Beonca Louis:** One of the most impactful ways of passing down history is through the oral tradition of storytelling. The cultural knowledge and information that has been passed down through speech from one generation to the next is how civilizations have come to know, celebrate and learn from their history. Sharing accounts of heroism ties to Harriet Tubman and the enslaved peoples of north America.

[00:00:44] **Beonca Louis:** Colonized nations have a running history of attempting to erase not only enslaved people's African heritage, but also their identity as human beings. Many of their life stories have not been accurately told [00:01:00] through the white lens, making it increasingly difficult for Americans to understand the impact of slavery on the enslaved and their kin. Harriet Tubman's story remains influential and her legacy lives on in her descendants to this day.

[00:01:21] **Beonca Louis:** Welcome to Walk in her Footsteps, Harriet Tubman's Life in Auburn, New York, a series exploring Harriet Tubman's life after slavery in her chosen home in the North. I'm Beonca Louis, an entrepreneur and brand ambassador for Cayuga Tourism here in Auburn. In our last episode, we explored the city of Auburn through Harriet's eyes, highlighting the sites her community built

[00:01:49] **Beonca Louis:** along with the places she frequented throughout her 50 plus years there. In this episode, we'll hear from Harriet's descendants to better [00:02:00] understand who Harriet was as a person and how her faith inspired her and others to never stop chasing freedom. We'll also dive into why food was such an integral component when it came to funding her compounds.

[00:02:17] **Beonca Louis:** While many know her as one of the most renowned conductors of the underground railroad, few know how Harriet led her life when she finally gained freedom. Michelle Jones Galvin, Harriet Tubman's great great grand niece co-authored the book "Beyond the Underground: Aunt Harriet, Moses of her People," with her mother Joyce E. Jones. Michelle explains how her mother went on a journey to research their aunt Harriet, a journey that few descendants of enslaved people had undergone before.

[00:02:51] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** No, this journey has been a long one, just so that folks know, the journey started with my mother actually. My [00:03:00] mother has done research on aunt Harriet and the family for a long, long time, I would say about 20 years or more. She started in the 1970s as an adult, probably in her early forties. And she really wanted to get down to the bottom of who we were related to and how we were related to aunt Harriet. She found out as a very young girl that we were related to Harriet Tubman.

[00:03:28] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** So now she was really challenged to find out exactly how, what were her biological ties. And it took forever because if you recall, there was no internet at the time everything had to be done by foot. She was going to libraries. She was looking at index cards. She was looking at microfiche. She was making all kinds of travel to the Eastern shore of Maryland and Canada.

[00:03:54] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** So it took us a while to be able to connect all the dots and to figure out exactly [00:04:00] how we were related. And as it turns out my three times, great grandmother, Sophia, is the sister of Harriet Tubman. And that's exactly how we're related.

[00:04:15] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet was not only a freedom seeker, leading others to refuge. She was an orator, hunter, cook lumberjack, nurse, and even a spy in the civil war.

[00:04:27] **Beonca Louis:** Michelle Jones Galvin shares a fact about Harriet that doesn't often get shared.

[00:04:33] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** Aunt Harriet suffered from a disability that we now call narcolepsy. And what it is is you involuntarily fall asleep at a moment's notice, and you have no idea that you're gonna go into that state.

[00:04:49] **Beonca Louis:** This impairment was caused by a traumatic brain injury Harriet suffered from when she was a child. An overseer hit her in the head with a heavy weight after [00:05:00] she refused to restrain a field hand who had attempted to escape the plantation. From this event, Harriet experienced seizures, narcolepsy, and severe headaches for the rest of her life.

[00:05:15] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** And what we found is that there's no record at all that she entered into this state during any of her rescues.

[00:05:23] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** And so I find that fascinating that when something can happen, just so immediately and involuntarily and the

importance of her work, for it not to be recorded, that she had any such happening during her rescues. I find quite amazing.

[00:05:42] **Beonca Louis:** Throughout her life, Harriet strived to provide more than what was given to her people. "Beyond the Underground," Chronicle's historic reconstruction while also giving readers an intimate look into the unique qualities that made Harriet remarkably influential to the history of the [00:06:00] United States. Michelle describes why Harriet's story needed to be told from a familial angle.

[00:06:07] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** There's a lot of work that is done by historians and others who really don't get to the point

[00:06:14] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** either. We know who she was, we know her work, but she had some very wonderful, personal qualities that I think people should know about. And one is her compassion. When we say compassion, we use that word all of the time and we really don't realize that there's a second part to it. Compassion is about someone having this ability to really feel the pain,

[00:06:42] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** the misery, the harm, the hurt of another person. But what we don't know, the second part of it is that you do something to try to eradicate it. So it's not just feeling sorry for someone or feeling as if you have a emotion [00:07:00] for someone. It's also that second part of doing something to eradicate or alleviate the pain, the hurt, the suffering.

[00:07:10] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** And that's what aunt Harriet was really all about. She was a compassionate person who felt that she knew the trials and tribulations of the people of African descent in this country, particularly during the time of slavery. And she wanted to do something to eradicate it. And thus, we have her rescue missions where she would take former slaves out of, of the land of bondage and deliver them to the land of freedom.

[00:07:40] **Beonca Louis:** Was there a shift of what happened of how you understood her before you did all the research and did the book, and then afterwards, what was that journey like for you?

[00:07:50] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** I always get asked that question and obviously there's been a tremendous evolution with regard to understanding my relationship to her [00:08:00] as a young girl in the fourth grade compared to what it is now, it's much fuller now. It's much more personal now. It's much more giving me and others the courage to not only understand what she was about, but to use her as an example, or as a model. She certainly is an example,

not only to me, but oh my goodness, other family members who are just so enamored of and recognize her as our beloved aunt Harriet.

[00:08:35] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet demonstrated her compassion by establishing a nursing home, serving black, elderly, and indigent. On her land, she retained a farm, orchards and gardens. Her relationship to food was critical to the operation of the compound. In order to fund the homes on the property, she sold produce harvested from her garden and meats from the livestock she raised.

[00:08:59] **Beonca Louis:** Here [00:09:00] in Auburn and Cayuga County, we are celebrating Harriet's bicentennial. There's lots of tributes happening, infusing history and food. What do we know about Harriet's relationship to food especially on her property?

[00:09:12] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** When we think about aunt Harriet and the 50 years that she lived in Auburn, and I think we have to know that she was an ordinary woman who did extraordinary things and we know that.

[00:09:24] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** We know her rescue missions. We know her work in the civil war. We know that she was very much supportive of the suffrage movement. And we know in her later years she established a home where the aged and indigent colored people called the John Brown Home for the Aged. And that John Brown was a very good friend of hers.

[00:09:46] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** And so they were like kindred spirits, but if we move away from the historic to the daily, I'm thinking that aunt Harriet lived like the rest of the people around her during that time. [00:10:00] She raised hogs. She raised chickens and geese. And I'm sure that the men in the community, particularly at that time, they were really the hunters of the community and they were hunting muskrat and raccoon, squirrel all kinds of things that we probably wouldn't really think about having at our dinner table today.

[00:10:22] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet gained an abundance of knowledge from her experience as a field worker, hunter and lumberjack. She passed these skills on to formally enslaved community members, showing them how to hunt and garden, making her farm as sustainable as possible.

[00:10:39] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** But back then, if we put ourselves back, then those are the kinds of animal meats that were commonly eaten on a daily basis. And she was also a great gardener. She loved to tend her garden. And we

know for a fact from our own family stories, that [00:11:00] everybody seemed to love rhubarb and snap peas, and lettuces and carrots and tomatoes.

[00:11:06] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** So what you would commonly find today in a vegetable garden, especially in central New York is very likely what we would find in her garden. And what we also found out was that on her 32 acre, uh, property, there were tens and tens of apple trees. And so it has come down through our family that the apple was her favorite fruit.

[00:11:33] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** So that's very interesting to know. And also there were peach and pear trees on that property as well.

[00:11:43] **Beonca Louis:** Citizens of Auburn recount stories of community members filling Harriet's basket with money, clothes, and food as donations for those she cared for. Harriet would walk miles, selling her produce, making it to neighboring towns, seeking support for her estate. [00:12:00]

[00:12:00] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** She could be seen. And I got this as a firsthand account from a woman named Alice Norris who actually lived in aunt Harriet's home.

[00:12:13] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** After aunt Harriet passed away. Uh, so she was from a family of three generations who actually lived in that home at 180 south street road, uh, for three generations after her death. But from Alice, I find that she could be seen walking toward Scipio with her basket of fruits and vegetables and selling them along the way.

[00:12:40] **Beonca Louis:** Scipio, New York is approximately 11 and a half miles south of Auburn.

[00:12:47] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** So that's a favorite kind of image that I have of her. And she was a walker by the way. She would walk into town quite often, several times a week. Not toward the [00:13:00] center of Auburn, but in the opposite direction, going further south to Scipio with her baskets of fruits and vegetables.

[00:13:11] **Beonca Louis:** There's so much we can all learn from aunt Harriet to discover what can be done in our own communities. To not just have compassion for others, but take action based on that compassion.

[00:13:23] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** Let's go back to the notable qualities because I do feel that there were certain things that set her apart from many

women day to day. And the other is self-sacrifice to be able to say to yourself, I decided I have the right to two things in life and that's liberty or death, and I'm bound to have one of them.

[00:13:52] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** And that is what moved her to be able to do the kind of work she did because she was [00:14:00] willing to die actually, for those causes. And to get oneself to that mental and psychological and physical level is quite an amazing feat, I believe. And she was also trustworthy.

[00:14:19] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet's character was admired by so many throughout her life of public service.

[00:14:24] **Beonca Louis:** One of her most famous supporters was fellow abolitionist, author and speaker Frederick Douglass.

[00:14:33] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** When we look at the words of Frederick Douglass and he writes a beautiful letter on behalf of aunt Harriet, almost like a character reference. And, um, my goodness, you really capture the essence of her by reading that letter.

[00:14:53] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** But there's a certain point at the end of the letter, where he says to her that [00:15:00] she has gone through so many perils and so many dangerous situations that she's to be commended for that because other people just talked about the movement where she really was like a foot soldier, but he also explains how he found her to be most honest and trustworthy.

[00:15:24] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** And when you take the word trustworthy, and you understand what that really means. And you take the fact that she rescued so many people, men, women, and children who entrusted their lives to her, you really understand what Frederick Douglass meant when he acclaimed her trustworthiness. It's just amazing.

[00:15:55] **Michelle Jones Galvin:** And one of the reasons why my mom wanted to do the book was [00:16:00] really to be able to have people have a personal relationship with aunt Harriet. And so this particular book, the way that we have shaped it is really about family folklore, memoir and historical reconstruction.

[00:16:25] **Beonca Louis:** I had the honor of speaking with Pastor Paris Price. She is a pastor at the Harriet Tubman Memorial AME Zion church here in Auburn, the church where Harriet worshiped. Pastor Price was inspired by the

history of the AME Zion Church and Harriet Tubman's trust in God and in God's people. While pastor price isn't directly descended from Harriet, she is a descendant by marriage.

[00:16:53] **Pastor Price:** I also had a familial relationship with the people of the AME [00:17:00] Zion church, and that my uncle had been a local preacher in the AME Zion Church. And that he also married a descendant of Harriet Tubman's.

[00:17:11] **Beonca Louis:** Pastor Price learned of Harriet's relationship to God at a young age. Historically, black churches were pillars of strength for formerly enslaved people during their time of refuge to the north.

[00:17:24] **Pastor Price:** I did learn about the history of Harriet Tubman from a young child. I learned about her heroism. I learned about how she loved God and loved God's people. And I also learned to be proud of who she was and what she did for this community, not just the Auburn community, but the central New York community as a whole, because through the AME Zion church, a lot of its pastors and members were well connected in this area during that period of American history. They were [00:18:00] connected in a way that they stood for freedom and justice for African people in general, the AME Zion church is named the, uh, freedom church specifically because of its original fight for freedom injustice for African Americans.

[00:18:17] **Beonca Louis:** Pastor Price explains why doctrine and spirituality were paramount in the community of enslaved people and why they hold such importance to current day African Americans of all religions.

[00:18:32] **Pastor Price:** Well, if you know the history of Christianity deeper than what has been taught in Western theology, you understand that Christianity is a very, very old religion and its roots are in Africa. So African people, as a people of knowing knew that there was a higher power in God. And so harriet's mother, her mother's [00:19:00] mother, her father, and her African ancestors had the belief and faith in God.

[00:19:08] **Pastor Price:** It may have been practiced differently, but it was nevertheless the belief that there is one true God, and that God is the ruler of and creator of all things. And so I believe that this faith was carried on. It was like I said earlier, it was one of the things that they could have within themselves that could not be taken or whipped out of them or beaten out of them.

[00:19:34] **Pastor Price:** So faith was something that became a part of African people in bondage in the diaspora.

[00:19:45] **Beonca Louis:** Today, the Harriet Tubman AME Zion church is the home church of additional descendants of Harriet. Pauline Copes Johnson, a great, great grand niece of Harriet is 94 years old and she still plays [00:20:00] piano in the congregation and has been playing every Sunday there for 70 years.

[00:20:06] **Pastor Price:** She loves to play the piano sometimes due to health, she's not playing every Sunday, but whenever she can, she plays.

[00:20:15] **Pastor Price:** And matter of fact, she recently played at the Martin Luther king celebration at another church. She played a modern organ, that's how much she loves God's people, God's music and being able to be of service in the community.

[00:20:34] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet's belief played a meaningful role in her fight for civil Liberty. She was devoted to God.

[00:20:40] **Beonca Louis:** Not only relying on her creed during times of struggle, but also liberation, a true sign of how essential spirituality was to her.

[00:20:50] **Pastor Price:** Well, imagine that you are a person in bondage and in that bondage, the only thing that you are allowed to learn about [00:21:00] is God and God's righteousness and his love for people.

[00:21:04] **Pastor Price:** And so through that, Harriet's faith was what she could take with her, wherever she went. It was a faith that allowed her to see herself as being loved by God, allowed her to see herself as being able to have the very best that God offered. So through her faith, Harriet Tubman recognized her humanity in a way that her captors did not allow her to see herself as.

[00:21:33] **Pastor Price:** And in that way, seeing herself through the eyes of God, she saw that she was justly entitled to a life of Liberty. And so in that, Harriet Tubman through God, through her faith, through her belief, decided to emancipate herself and that of her family.

[00:21:57] **Beonca Louis:** Judith [00:22:00] Bryant explains her experience growing up as a descendant of Harriet Tubman.

[00:22:06] **Judith Bryant:** Yes. I always knew, but I didn't know she was famous. I didn't know. I didn't know about the underground rail-. We didn't

grow up learning that kind of history. My mother was born in the house where I live now, which was built by her grandfather,

[00:22:21] **Judith Bryant:** my great-grandfather who was a nephew of Harriet Tubman's. I'm descended from one of her brothers, William who was originally Henry Ross. Three of the brothers escaped. She led them to, to escape on Christmas Eve in 1854. She took them to Canada in St. Catherine's, where they stayed. And then the three brothers and she settled in Auburn in 1859.

[00:22:48] **Judith Bryant:** We've been here since then.

[00:22:50] **Beonca Louis:** What was it like in your household? Did you hear stories about Harriet Tubman's legacy at all?

[00:22:55] **Judith Bryant:** No. I grew up in Skaneateles which is five miles from here. My father was born in [00:23:00] Skaneateles. So when they got married, my mother moved there and I was born in Auburn, but I grew up in Skaneateles. We didn't talk about Harriet Tubman. And when I came to Auburn to visit my grandmother at the time in the mid 1940s, a biography was being written about her by Earl Conrad, who was a native Auburnian and a friend of our family. So he came to my grandmother for information. At that time, my grandmother, she had taken care of Harriet.

[00:23:25] **Judith Bryant:** They were all very close. She had firsthand information, which none of us now does, we don't have any firsthand information.

[00:23:33] **Beonca Louis:** Did that have an effect on you just knowing that that's in your bloodline?

[00:23:37] **Judith Bryant:** She wasn't the celebrity that she is today to the public, we knew that. But in 1940, I don't know the year exactly, a Liberty ship was christened at Portland, Maine, and all my mother and my grandmother, her cousins, they all went to it. It's just been part of her family, but we never looked at it from the perspective of the public. The public [00:24:00] looks at her from a standpoint of a stranger.

[00:24:03] **Beonca Louis:** Do you feel like she was properly represented in the documentaries that they tried to put together?

[00:24:08] **Judith Bryant:** Well now, yes, because the scholarship has been done. And, uh, ever since I think roots in the 1970s, when it became popular to

examine your genealogy. Before then people really didn't do that very much. And at that point, I think, and particularly black people who took an interest in their own families and their own genealogy, trying to discover who they were, where they came from.

[00:24:33] **Judith Bryant:** So it became popular part of the culture as it is now. But when I was growing up, it was not, not that.

[00:24:40] **Beonca Louis:** I feel like she would be so happy to know how her descendants were able to live in such a peaceful environment, much different from what she had to experience and hearing that the peace that you were able to experience is just wonderful.

[00:24:52] **Judith Bryant:** Well, the marvel is to me here. So she brought her parents and her three brothers. She went on about her [00:25:00] work for a while, till after the war. By the end of the war, they were all here. The three brothers and her parents and she so six family members and they all had children and they all had grand nieces and nephews.

[00:25:13] **Judith Bryant:** So the fact that my great-grandfather, her brother's son, was able to acquire property in 1880 on the house, on the corner where I live now a few short years from the time they came here and they bought the property and built the houses. They didn't buy the houses already built. So I think all the brothers own property in Auburn, all on Chapman Avenue where Booker T is, all on that street.

[00:25:42] **Beonca Louis:** Judith reminds us of the harsh realities of slavery, recognizing the difficulty for older generations to retell this history.

[00:25:52] **Judith Bryant:** And she had always said it was painful. This was not fun. Today, people sort of take it for [00:26:00] granted. It was not a pleasant topic. So you didn't sit around the dinner table, swapping stories.

[00:26:05] **Judith Bryant:** And I think sometimes people think, but I mean, even if you take people today who fought in a war who never talked about it. You don't know at all what they did cuz they, they never mentioned it. Well, it's painful. So I mean, people have lots of families have lots of reasons for not passing on stories down to their children and sometimes they do and, and you don't hear them or you don't wanna hear them or you're playing, you're not focused on the stories in the same way that you are when you become older.

[00:26:34] **Judith Bryant:** And you realize it's history. It's not just my family. It's American history.

[00:26:40] **Beonca Louis:** Harriet's descendants continue to honor her legacy through literary works, worship, careers and public service and more. Harriet's legacy is seen and felt throughout the streets of Auburn and is carried on through her kin today.

[00:26:58] **Kasi Lemmons:** She was illiterate. She could [00:27:00] neither read nor write, and yet she was able to accomplish these really amazing feats of courage. This was resistance.

[00:27:09] **Beonca Louis:** That was American film director and screenwriter, Kasi Lemmons. She directed the 2019 drama *Harriet*.

[00:27:22] **Beonca Louis:** On the next Walk in her Footsteps, we'll explore Harriet's legacy in the 21st century and how people all around the world continue to honor her. I would like to thank my guests, Michelle Jones Galvin, three times great grand niece of Harriet Tubman and co-author of "Beyond the Underground: Aunt Harriet, Moses of her People," Pastor Paris Price, pastor at the Harriet Tubman Memorial AME Zion church in Auburn, New York and Judith Bryant, Harriet Tubman's great, great grand niece. Walk in her [00:28:00] Footsteps is produced by Whetstone Media in partnership with Tour Cayuga. Thank you to the walk in her footsteps team lead producer Tonina Saputo, managing producer, Marvin Yueh, audio editor, Martino Cardoso, and associate producer, Danya Abdelhamid. Tour Cayuga would like to thank the Auburn community who carries on Harriet Tubman's legacy.

[00:28:25] **Beonca Louis:** For more information on Harriet Tubman's legacy in New York, visit TourCayuga.com. I'd also like to thank Whetstone founder, Stephen Satterfield, Whetstone Radio Collective head of podcast, Celine Glasier, sound engineer, Max Kotelchuck, music director, Catherine Yang, associate producer, Quentin Lebeau, production coordinator,

[00:28:49] **Beonca Louis:** Shabnam Ferdowsi, and sound intern Simon Lavender. Cover art created by Whetstone art director, Alexandra Bowman. You can learn more about all things [00:29:00] happening at Whetstone at WhetstoneMagazine.com. I'm Beonca Louis and thank you for listening.