



THE BLADE/ISAAC RITCHEY

**Cathy Kamenca, right, TV program coordinator, outreach, and engagement coordinator at WGTE Public Media, directs visitors to a table of prizes during the Starlite Theater Group's season opener at Nederhouser Community Hall in Sylvania's Olander Park.**

# Theater probes Sylvania's role in the flight to freedom

By **SHEILA HOWARD**  
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Black History comes with stories of hardship and freedom, defeat and victory — a deep history that resides right here in our backyard.

"A lot of people don't realize the history of northwest Ohio as it relates to the Underground Railroad in terms of how important this area was for folks that were escaping oppression and going to

**BLACK**  
**HISTORY**  
**MONTH**

the north and onward to Canada," said LaMont Stewart, a financial adviser at Cetera in Toledo.

Mr. Stewart was among a crowd of more than 140 attendees that gathered Wed-

nesday to learn more historical facts about the pivotal role Sylvania played as one of the last stops on runaway slaves' journey toward Detroit before ferrying across the Detroit River to Canada and into freedom.

"This is our Black History event, and we wanted to focus on it because Sylvania has two properties that were part of

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the Underground Railroad," said Linda Szyskowski, executive director of Starlite Theater who hosted the Step into History event at Nederhouser Community Hall in Sylvania's Olander Park.

Presented in partnership with Outdoor Sylvania and Heritage Sylvania, the free event featured local experts who expounded on Sylvania's role in the Underground Railroad while WGTE-PBS showed the documentary *Harriet Tubman: Visions of Freedom*.

"I am just fascinated by Harriet Tubman and all that she meant to Black people," said Alysia White of Sylvania, in attendance with her family. "I'm here because it's important to me that my girls know about her and the struggle African Americans went through."

While she's heard that her home city was a part of the escaped slaves' journey toward freedom, 14-year-old Bianca

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John Page, Outdoor Sylvania events manager

White said she still wanted to learn more.

"I know a lot about it, but I want the details," said young Bianca, a sentiment echoed by her younger sister Brielle, 11.

Mrs. White said she has conversations with her daughters about the challenges Black people have endured "just to live," so events like these are essential and valuable for her family.

"It's important to me that they understand that everybody doesn't have white privilege that we have, so it's important," she said.

In addition to the history lesson, the free event served up light refreshments, and WGTE offered free giveaways and the raffle for a handmade quilt made by award-winning quilter Sheila Painter. One lucky attendee won a Starlite Movie Night goodie-filled tote bag

and a year membership for Heritage Sylvania.

"Sylvania has a strong history with the Underground Railroad," said Outdoor Sylvania events manager John Page. "It's not just Black history; it's everybody's history. We are proud to be part of this community and we're even more proud to be able to present this to a community."

Organizers were both surprised and happy about the full-house attendance, which may have gotten a little help from the unseasonably warm temperature.

"We collaborated, and this is our first joint effort with them. We're very excited, and the turnout is just fabulous," said Cathy Kamenca, TV program coordinator, outreach, and engagement coordinator at WGTE Public Media. "The Underground Railroad is some-

thing we should talk about because it comes from here."

Arnie and Yvonne Gates of Sylvania said they were happy to come out and support the Starlite Theater.

"We enjoy coming to these events but this one particularly because it's about our area," said Mrs. Gates, adding that the presentation would serve as a refresher course for what she's learned in the past.

Underground Railroad stops in Sylvania included the Lathrop House, where the Lathrop family sheltered escaped slaves, and the Harroun Barn, which now sits on the campus of Flower Hospital, where slaves were allowed to hide.

"We can get a chance to educate people," Mr. Page said. "So you're going to drive past Flower Hospital and look at the barn, you go past Lathrop House or maybe you sit down on one of the benches, and you start with the picture 160, 170 years ago, and maybe see the history a little differently now."

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