

# Teaching the lessons of slavery

By MEGAN LAMBERT

While gathering my thoughts for this response to Laurie Loisel's Nov. 16 column on the Underground Railroad simulation activity during a fifth-grade Nature's Classroom trip, I did a little Internet surfing to learn more about this program and others like it. My 9-year-old son — whose school, to my knowledge, does not participate in such a trip or activity — looked over my shoulder and read the title of an article describing a program in Louisiana that has fifth-graders stand on auction blocks as though they were being sold and subjects them to other such simulated cruelties, all in the hopes of instilling empathy and driving home the horrors of this chapter in our nation's history. "Slave Camp!" Rory exclaimed incredulously. "What's after that, 'Go to Prison Camp'? That's crazy."

## Guest Column

Crazy. Well, my word to describe this sort of effort is: misguided. I don't wish to vilify the well-meaning educators who have, for years, overseen or implemented this program and others like it; nor do I wish to cast aspersions on those, like Loisel, who have seen this as a "scary" program that teaches a powerful lesson in empathy. Instead, I wish to contribute to what I see as an important, difficult and necessary discussion with broader implications for the teaching of history and the needs of diverse learners. I admittedly do so with hope that, after further discussion, participation in such programs will cease and that other means of learning about slavery and its legacy will be implemented.

In addition to echoing the important concerns that Denise Elliott's letter to the editor (*Gazette*, Nov. 18) raised about her daughter's participation in this program, I wish to address the other side of the coin: the inadvertent trivialization of slavery and its legacy that inevitably takes place through exercises such as these. After all, even if the experiences that Denise Elliott describes are upsetting or traumatizing to some or most of the participating children, the curriculum cannot and must not come close to recreating the actual horrors of slavery. While the children are called "animals,"

## More on the Internet

Laurie Loisel's column on the Underground Railroad class, "Students' 'scary' hour offers a major lesson in empathy," and Denise Elliott's letter to the editor on the program's effect on her daughter can be read on *GazetteNet*.

and are threatened with being hung, the impossibility of going much further without resorting to actual physical violence or hate speech necessarily presents the lesson in a truncated and deliberately sanitized way, carefully not stimulating the feelings and experiences of the young participants.

In order to minimize trauma, the heightened sensitivity brought on by being outdoors, at night, away from home is diffused by minimizing the horrific elements of history, making it a neat and tidy story of bravery, escape and safety. This is problematic as it teaches a false version of the past and sets a poor example for children to explore our unhappy history together with honesty and integrity. For those children who are more familiar than their peers with the history of racism and slavery in our country, this false history lesson is potentially painful, invalidating and silencing.

So, the Underground Railroad simulation curriculum is caught up in a paradox that undermines its efficacy at best and inflicts hurt and dishonest history lessons on children at worst. It is at once potentially traumatic for children and too gentle for honesty. What to do? Cease participation in such simulations and engage in other means of addressing, exploring and learning about slavery and its legacy.

Although reflecting on a vastly different, and yet also horrific, history of persecution, commentary from the Florida Holocaust Museum's Web site states this concern as well, or better, than I could, and so I quote:

"The problem with trying to simulate situations from the Holocaust is that complex events and actions are oversimplified, and students are left with a skewed view of history. Since there are numerous primary source accounts, both written and visual, as well as survivors and eye-witnesses who can describe actual choices faced and made by individuals, groups and nations during this period, teachers

should draw upon these resources and refrain from simulation games that lead to trivialization of the subject matter."

Substitute "Holocaust" with the word "slavery" and perhaps readers will see that no matter how well-intentioned, such activities result in dishonest representations of history that ultimately undermine whatever good intentions lie behind their exercise. We, of course, have no living survivors from our nation's history of slavery, but other resources and curriculums abound. Local author Julius Lester's work alone in books such as "To Be a Slave," "From Slave Ship to Freedom Road," "The Old African," "The Day of Tears" and others provides fertile ground for research, reflection and study.

Finally, I am further disturbed by the simulation curriculum that Laurie Loisel describes because by placing white students in the role of "slave" in the Nature's Classroom exercise, this activity robs them of a chance to explore their identity as people with unearned racial privilege in our society. This last statement relates directly to my experience as a white person dedicated to active anti-racist engagement in our society. I still have a lot to learn, and my biggest lessons have come from being part of a multiracial adoptive family.

As I read Loisel's commentary I couldn't help but project into the future and imagine my children in the woods, at night, engaging in this activity. How would our biracial son and daughter — Jamaican/Caucasian and African-American/Caucasian respectively — navigate this experience? What about our two African-American pre-adoptive foster children? And what about our Latina daughter? Knowing what I do, I think I'd be tempted to prevent them from participating. What a dreadful position to be in as a parent: orchestrating the exclusion of one's children from a much-anticipated school program.

I don't envy the parents facing this choice, and I hope that participating schools will not choose to use this optional piece of the Nature's Classroom curriculum in the future. There are other ways to teach and to learn about this history with integrity, honesty and sensitivity. We must examine the history of slavery and its legacy; Laurie Loisel's article and Denise Elliott's letter point out that we must also re-examine how we do so.

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