

Freedom Seekers Film to Premiere during Black History Month

The Niagara Historical Society & Museum will host a screening of a documentary film, *Risking Everything: A Story of Niagara's Freedom-Seekers*, on February 27th at 8 pm, in celebration of African-American freedom-seekers who made their way to Canada.

The half-hour film was co-directed and produced by the award-winning photographer Isadore "Izzy" Bleckman and his wife, Buffalo writer, teacher and researcher Mary G. Roseberry, who is a retired professor of literature and journalism at Niagara County Community College in Western New York. The film tells the story of African-Americans who made their dangerous journey from slave states to the Niagara River before the US Civil War. Lewiston, NY was one of the last "way stations" along the U.S.-Canada border, along with Buffalo and Niagara Falls. U.S. citizens along that border, including residents of Lewiston, NY, sheltered and guided many people who arrived at the river's edge, ready to make that crossing so they could live as free people in Canada.

The film's photographer, "Izzy" Bleckman, is best-known as Charles Kuralt's cameraman for the beloved CBS News series *On the Road* and later for *CBS Sunday Morning*. His wife and business partner, Mary Roseberry, led the film's historical research and interview process. Together they edited hundreds of hours of video footage and interviews into the half-hour documentary, with the editing assistance of Bleckman's daughter, Sheera Bleckman.

In 2009, the Bleckman-Roseberry team began to document the creation of Lewiston's "Freedom Crossing" monument, by renowned sculptor Susan Geissler of Youngstown, NY. Bleckman filmed hundreds of hours of the monument's construction and installation. His daughter filmed the finishing stages near her Colorado home. Upon the monument's installation in Lewiston, Roseberry and Bleckman spent another two years researching the history and interviewing individuals on both sides of the river, documenting local commitment to the opposition of slavery. Then they began the daunting editing effort, distilling the massive collection of film footage into a story.

"The monument tells a powerful story," says Roseberry, "a continuing story about people who risk their lives to find a place where they can live a decent life, and others who are willing to assist them." One figure in Lewiston's monument points – literally and symbolically -- across the river to the safety of Ontario. There the team found additional stories, told by historians and descendants of individuals who made new lives in Canada.

Expanding the local story with the wider experience of African-Americans who dreamed of a better life, the film features the Jim Hill High School Choir of Jackson, Mississippi, singing traditional spirituals, "Wade in the Water," "Deep River", and "Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel," standing in the courthouse in Jackson under the direction of their director, James Hawkins. The choir has taken top awards in international competitions, including one in Toronto several years ago.

"We often think of slavery as if it is a long-ago story," says Roseberry, "but the past is our beginning and has taken us to who we are today. The stories of earlier generations need to be told again and again, not only in written narrative, but in images, in the spoken voice, and in art such as Susan's sculpture. My husband and I have had the opportunity to play a role in expanding and deepening our international story."

Buffalo's Rich Newberg, retired Senior Correspondent for WIVB-TV, who has done many stories on local black history, screened the film recently. "Izzy and Mary's film uses a unique and beautiful approach to tell this story," says Newberg. "They bring attention to the power and beauty of the raging river and the constant dangers real people face in order to find a safe place to live and work and raise their children."

Newberg describes the film as "a testament to the human spirit on so many levels, from the courage and perseverance of families fleeing lives of bondage, to those who gave them shelter and encouragement along the way, to the artistry of sculptor Susan Geissler and gifted videographer Izzy Bleckman. Izzy, his wife Mary and his daughter Sheera, have produced a documentary that touches the soul of America, confronting the very issue that tore away at the founding freedoms of our nation: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"

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Mary Roseberry

laframboise@earthlink.net