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Show tells kids about famed abolitionist

AMANDA CUDA

No one knows what the weather was like the day that an 8-year-old Frederick Douglass left his plantation in St. Michaels, Md., for Baltimore more than 150 years ago. Was it sunny on that day, when a young Douglass left behind the only life he'd known to live with a family he'd never met? Was it raining when Douglass, destined to become a famed abolitionist, embarked on this new life?

It's unknown. There's no mention of the weather conditions in Douglass' book "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself."

But on Tuesday morning, when crews from Palace Production Center and Docere Palace Studios attempted to shoot a public television special on Douglass at Captain's Cove in Bridgeport, it was definitely raining. And cold. And overcast.

The weather conditions were an obstacle for the crew, and especially the cast, many of whom were clad in 19th-century garb — not exactly known for its wind and rain resistance.

But they plugged along, buoyed by the knowledge that their project could help change the way children learn history. The Douglass special is part of a pilot program called "Young American Heroes," a collaboration between the two production studios, as well as Connecticut Public Television, the Fairfield University Graduate School of Education and other organizations.



Kendall Jones, of Hamden, poses on the deck of the schooner... (Ned Gerard/Staff photographer)

The program will mix a variety of media, including Web sites, a DVD and a graphic novel, but the main component is a TV series highlighting young

Americans who played an important role in history. The first episode focuses on Douglass, who would go on to escape slavery and become a well-known activist. Specifically, the episode focuses on Douglass through his childhood and teenage years. The goal is to show today's young people history through the eyes of people their age, said Tim Smith, Docere executive producer, who wrote the script.

Tuesday was the first day of shooting and, despite the dismal weather, spirits were relatively high. The scene being filmed was of the day young Douglass boarded a boat for Baltimore — a pivotal time in his life, Smith said. It was in Baltimore that he became educated, which set the stage for his later achievements.

"The trip from the plantation to Baltimore is a turning point," Smith said. "That's where he gets the tools and enlightenment to learn that slavery is not the life he wants to live."

The scene was shot on the Mystic Whaler, a 40-year-old replica of a late 19th-century coastal cargo schooner. The star of the scene was Kendall Jones, 12, of Hamden, who plays 8-year-old Frederick Douglass. Actor Jamie Hector, best known for playing Marlo Stanfield on the HBO series "The Wire," will play the older Douglass. Jones was decked out in full old-time garb for the part on Tuesday, including knickers. In fact, you had to look closely to notice the sole 21st-century element of Jones' appearance — the braces on his teeth.

A seventh-grader at Hamden Middle School, Jones originally auditioned for another role before he landed the part of young Frederick. Though he doesn't plan to pursue a career as an actor (he wants to be an architect), he was excited about his new job, and didn't even mind having to be out in such terrible weather.

"I think it's really cool," he said. "It's a first experience for me."

Hector was supposed to shoot scenes in Bridgeport as well, but couldn't make it due to scheduling conflicts. He'll be in the state to shoot in May.

The "Young American Heroes" project was one of seven to receive preliminary funding through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting's American History and Civics Initiative, which aims to address gaps in middle school and high school students' knowledge of history. More than 80 proposals were submitted, and only two or three will receive full funding. Decisions on the funding will be made in the fall.

If "Young American Heroes" is among the projects picked, the goal is to produce more installments of the TV show, focusing on other young people in history. Regardless of

whether the project gets more funding, the Douglass episode will air on Connecticut Public Television in September.

The entire episode will be filmed within the next two weeks in locations around Connecticut. Other sites being used in the production include Roton Middle School in Norwalk, and various locations in Mystic.

The production's cast and crew are comprised primarily of Connecticut residents, and local schoolchildren even had a role in shaping the program. Those involved with the production held focus groups with area teachers and students to get their feedback. The show's script also was posted on the "Young American Heroes" Web site (www.youngamericanheroes.com) where teachers and students could read it and offer their thoughts.

Since the Web site launched in February, more than 700 people have logged on, said Deborah Weingrad, Palace Productions vice president and editorial director.

Weingrad said involving real kids in the process helps create a program that's accessible to modern kids. "What we're trying to do is create a breakthrough way of teaching history to middle school and high school students," she said.

Meanwhile, Tuesday morning, cast and crew were just trying to get through the shoot without getting too cold or wet. It's lucky that Douglass' book doesn't mention weather conditions on the day he left for Baltimore, Weingrad said.

Because they would have been in serious trouble if he had left on a beautiful, sunny day. "Thank goodness he didn't go into details," she said.