

COVER STORY
BY EILEEN C. HERBERT

THE PROGRAM IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

History professor Dr. Bruce J. Dierenfield teaches Canisius students about one of the most dramatic periods in our nation's annals: the struggle for civil rights by African Americans and their eventual climb to a position of equality and power.

PHOTO BY K.C. KRAIT



Above: C. T. Vivian leads a prayer during a demonstration for African American voting rights on the Dallas County Courthouse steps in Selma, AL on February 5, 1965.

**"YOU CAN TURN YOUR BACK ON ME,
SHERIFF CLARK, BUT YOU CAN'T
TURN YOUR BACK ON JUSTICE!"**

yelled civil rights activist C. T. Vivian. It was February 1965 and our nation was embroiled in a battle for racial equality. Vivian was at the forefront of that struggle, leading non-violent demonstrations for fair voting practices in Selma, Alabama. The notorious Sheriff Jim Clark led Selma's campaign to block African American voting rights. It wasn't the first time Vivian confronted Clark and it wouldn't be the last. Just weeks later on the courthouse steps, Vivian admonished the sheriff again, comparing him and his deputies to Hitler and his followers. It was a defining moment for Vivian as he looked Clark in the eyes and wagged a finger in his face. But it was the last straw for Clark, who responded by punching Vivian down the courthouse steps and then arresting him.

The historic event was caught on film. Nearly 40 years later, Canisius College students relived that fateful day as they watched *Eyes on the Prize*, an award-winning documentary on the Civil Rights Movement. The film was part of a Canisius history course entitled the Civil Rights Movement, which introduced students to such civil rights pioneers as Vivian, E.D. Nixon, James Lawson, Fred Shuttlesworth and James Farmer. The students learned how these activists paved the way for Martin Luther King Jr., the best-known leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

TWO DAYS AFTER watching the documentary, history came alive for these students when the civil rights legend himself, Rev. C. T. Vivian, visited their class to talk about his work with King and that day on Selma's courthouse steps.

Veronica Serwacki '05, an English major, couldn't believe that she and her classmates had the opportunity to meet Vivian in person. "Rev. Vivian captivated us with his deep-rooted beliefs and confidence," she said. "It was easy for me to imagine why a crowd listening to this charismatic leader would want to get up and follow him despite the dangerous circumstances of the time."

Vivian and several other civil rights legends visited the campus this past year through the newly-established Canisius College Program in the African American Experience, created by Dr. Bruce J. Dierenfield, professor of history and assistant director of the All-College Honors Program. Funded through the college's Peter Canisius Distinguished Teaching Professorship, Dierenfield's program includes innovative coursework, field trips to local and national historically significant sites, a variety of cultural

encounters, and a distinguished lecture series open to the campus and the community.

"Bruce's program provides an exposure to African American history that has been missing from our history offerings for years,"

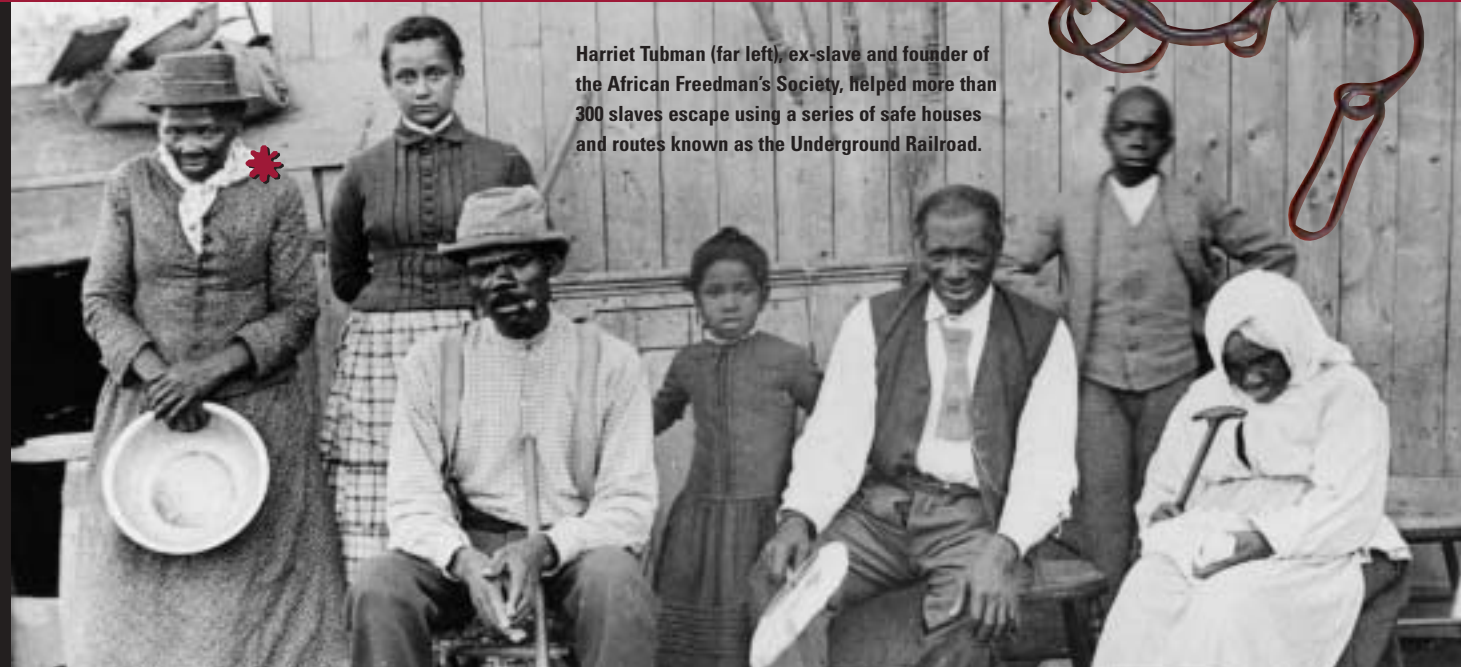
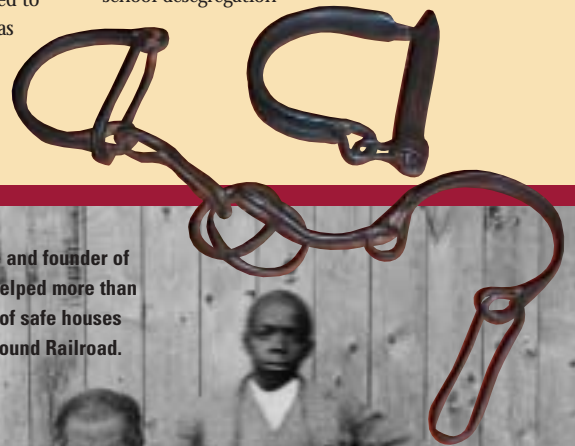
said Dr. Herbert J. Nelson, vice president for academic affairs. "This exposure is of great value not only to African American students who wish to explore their own heritage but to all students who seek to understand this important dimension of American history."

Dr. Robert J. Butler, professor of English and director of the All-College Honors Program, who co-taught African American History and Literature with Dierenfield, encouraged his colleague to apply for the professorship. "Bruce is ideally suited to teach the program," said Butler. "He has studied the Civil Rights Movement very carefully and has taught African American history brilliantly over the

years." Butler added that the program affects a wide range of courses in the college's curriculum, so it has a terrific resonance in the Canisius academic community.

The program also resonates in the local community and with Western New York educators like Wilmer Froman MSEd '03, who plans to teach a more in-depth curriculum in African American history to his eighth grade students at Amherst Middle School. Froman was a student in Dierenfield's week-long civil rights course this past summer. "I can now point to a picture of Rev. Vivian and tell my class, 'This man was *there* working with Dr. King. I talked to this man; I heard him speak; and I shook his hand.' It makes it so real for them and for me too."

Froman was ecstatic when he heard that Canisius will host Melba Patillo Beals. She and eight other black teenagers faced angry mobs as they tried to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. Linda Brown Thompson and Cheryl Brown Henderson, the plaintiffs in the 1954 landmark school desegregation



Harriet Tubman (far left), ex-slave and founder of the African Freedman's Society, helped more than 300 slaves escape using a series of safe houses and routes known as the Underground Railroad.



Dierenfield and students in his Slavery course traveled to South Carolina in fall 2003 to tour Charleston's rice plantations, slave quarters and to experience the culture of the South.

case *Brown v. Board of Education*, will also speak on campus this spring. (See page 14) "I plan to take my students to the lectures so they can hear what these women, who were their age at the time, went through as children to attend school," said Froman. "I know it will be an experience they will take with them for the rest of their lives."

"The future of the city of Buffalo, in particular, is inextricably intertwined with the future of its very substantial African American community," added Nelson. "Bruce's lecture series and his work with local teachers provide one additional reason to hope that better understanding of our complex past will help shape a future that builds on and extends the achievements of all."

The Program in the African American Experience is divided into a three-course cycle: **Slavery, The "New Negro"** and the **Civil Rights Movement**. The slavery course, taught this past fall, focused on the "black holocaust" of millions of Africans who were seized in West and Central Africa, transported to the New World, and enslaved in what became the United States. The course traced the roots of American slavery until their ultimate freedom following the Civil War.

In-class material was enhanced by lectures from African American scholars and several trips, including a tour of the Freedom Schooner *Amistad* when it docked in Buffalo last September. The recreated vessel was made famous by the 1839 shipboard revolt that led to America's first human rights case before the Supreme Court. The students visited

Harriet Tubman's home and gravesite in Auburn, NY and several of the Underground Railroad sites in Western New York. The class also experienced African American culture. They danced with performers from The Langston Hughes Institute; listened to educator and storyteller, Karima Amin; met playwright Janine Carter; and attended a performance by the Canisius College Gospel Ensemble.

Another element of the course offered one student the opportunity to have her ancestry traced. Jeena Owens '04, a communication studies major, is anxiously awaiting results of DNA testing that she anticipates will trace her father's ancestry back to West Africa.

But for many students, the most memorable part of the slavery course was a trip to South Carolina to tour the rice plantations and slave quarters. "Some of the plantations we saw in

Charleston once had more than a thousand slaves working there in malarial conditions," said Dierenfield. "We also stayed very near to where Denmark Vesey, one of the great slave rebels, was hanged. It was so gratifying for me to be able to take students to see these historic sites tied to American history. It was very moving."

"It was a different experience to see the slave cabins and know that people actually lived on the plantations for their whole lives because that was all they could do," said Owens. "It was so real. You could still see the dirt floors."

Lacey Johnson '05, a communication studies major and president of the college's Afro-American Society, added that it was a powerful experience to tour the slave cabins.

"We read about these plantations in our textbooks and then there we were, standing where the slaves lived. It was overwhelming."

Johnson said the course was the best class that she has taken so far at Canisius. "It was so interesting to learn about all these great people that you don't learn about in high school or grammar school because there isn't enough time, and realize what powerful things they have accomplished."

Froman agrees. "I left the class feeling energized and equipped with knowledge that I didn't have before. I think it is Bruce's passion for the topic that comes through in the classroom and makes the program the success that it is."

For Dierenfield, it is exactly that – a passion.



"The Voices of Freedom Quilt" was created by second graders in Colchester, CT and presented to the Freedom Schooner *Amistad* in 2001. The quilt was created to inspire others to learn about diversity.



“The struggle of African Americans, to work their way out of the state of slavery to a position of equality and eventually power, is one of the great stories of American history,”

he said. “It is the *most* dramatic story in American history. It still excites me.”

Dierenfield’s interest in the Civil Rights Movement began with his admiration for the late Senator Hubert Humphrey (D-MN), who was a big champion of the movement. “I admired him because he supported African American justice when it wasn’t fashionable or politically beneficial to do so,” stated Dierenfield, whose interest in African American history can also be traced back to his religious beliefs.

“The message of the Bible says that we are all God’s children. How can you say this is true for one group and not another? I grew up believing in equality.”

Born in Iowa and raised in Minnesota, a state known for its progressive thinking, Dierenfield earned his bachelor’s degree in history from St. Olaf College with Phi Beta Kappa honors. “The ethos of Minnesota is one of treating everyone on an equal basis,” he explained. “There is a progressive spirit in that state that you cannot miss. So, I really grew up with that feeling.” Dierenfield was a Fulbright scholar in Germany and taught in Finland and China after earning his master’s

and doctorate degrees in American history from the University of Virginia. He recalled that when he arrived in Virginia for graduate school it was like the Civil Rights Movement had not even started. “I remember thinking, ‘my God, what is going on here?’”

His bewilderment with Southern politics escalated to irritation as he became familiar with the agenda of now deceased Virginia Congressman Howard W. Smith. “He was a man of great power who regarded civil rights as civil wrongs and was opposed to the whole idea of the Civil Rights Movement,” explained Dierenfield. Smith wielded a tremendous amount of power as chairman of the Congressional House Rules Committee, which determined what legislation would be considered by the full House. “Through his position, he blocked the promise of our government, the promise that we are all created equal and entitled to equal protection of the laws,” said Dierenfield. “I really saw this as a denial of our own constitutional rights.” Smith and the influence that Southern men of power had on African Americans, later became the focus of Dierenfield’s graduate research.

Dierenfield said he had several life experiences that provided him with a sense of what it feels like to be in a minority. For instance, he worked as a waiter for the Great Northern Railroad while at St. Olaf, and was the only white person employed in the dining car of the train. “We wore all-white outfits with bow ties, and had to stand erect as we came into Seattle and as we left because one of the big bosses might be looking from the hills down into the dining car,” he said. “I wouldn’t argue that it was anywhere near the same as being African American but it did give me a different perspective.”

And it is a different perspective that Dierenfield hopes to impart on his students.

Right now he is teaching the Civil Rights Movement course to students in the Honors Program. He will then offer the course to all undergraduate students in spring 2005. The “New Negro,” will be taught during the fall 2004 semester and will explore the social, political and economic controls placed on African Americans by an unforgiving South during the period from Reconstruction through the Roaring Twenties. “We will look at the greatest internal migration in American history, transforming American culture and politics, especially during the Harlem Renaissance,” stated Dierenfield. “This great migration led hundreds of thousands of black Southerners to the Promised Land above the Mason-Dixon line and resulted in a great outpouring of artistic talent.”

A trip to Harlem is planned, where students will explore the sights and sounds of what was known in the early 20th century as the “black capital of the world.” The group will see performances at the famed Apollo Theater and Dance Theater of Harlem and attend worship services at the world-renowned Abyssinian Baptist Church. Closer to home, students will visit the Colored Musicians Club in downtown Buffalo.



Since 1918, the Colored Musicians Club has hosted jazz greats including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Jimmy Lunceford and Ella Fitzgerald. Dierenfield and his students will visit the club during the fall 2004 semester.



Dierenfield visits with Rev. William Henderson, pastor of Buffalo's El-Bethel Assembly, formerly the Michigan Street Baptist Church. The church was an Underground Railroad site.

Dierenfield's Peter Canisius Professorship will conclude in spring 2005 but his mission to educate students on this important aspect of American history will remain.

"I want to continue to provide our students with travel opportunities and continue to bring great speakers to benefit our campus community and the community at large,"

he said. Nelson added, "I hope and expect that these courses will continue to be offered in some form for many years to come."

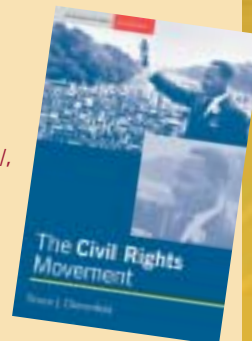
As does Vivian, who gives the Canisius Program in the African American Experience high marks. "Through the program, students will begin to ask themselves the question, 'What kind of world do I want to live in?' That is what the program is helping them to do. It is helping them to answer the question, 'What does it mean to be human in my own time, not in somebody else's, but in my own time.' 'What does it mean for me as an individual and what does it mean for the society in which I live.'" Vivian added, "Young people need to understand that they too can make a difference. They too can lift the world. If they have the character and the resolve and the ability, they too can be part of something great."

But can a course actually inspire this much energy and emotion? Can a professor inspire students to the point that they will take an active role?

Lacey Johnson says, "yes!" After she completed the slavery course, Johnson was hungry for more information. "I want to read the books that Dr. Dierenfield suggested for extra reading, and I plan to attend the upcoming lectures and stay as involved in the program as I possibly can." Johnson also felt motivated to share the knowledge she gained from the course with her fellow students. As president of the Afro-American Society, she decided to start with the society's members. "I was in a bookstore recently looking for books on African American history and I thought that we should really have all these books in our clubroom, available to our members. Dr. Dierenfield's class really encouraged me to learn more about African American history. He motivated me to want to teach, educate and share the information I learned."

PREVIEW

The Civil Rights Movement, by Dr. Bruce Dierenfield at pearsoned.co.uk/academics/, will be published in March 2004 by Pearson Longman Publishers.



In September 1862, President Abraham Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared all persons held as slaves forever free.

UPCOMING LECTURES

* **Melba Patillo Beals**
Member of the Little Rock Nine who, as a 15-year old student, faced angry mobs as she tried to enter Central High School
Wednesday, March 31, 2004
 7:30 p.m. | Grupp Fireside Lounge located in the Richard E. Winter '42 Student Center

* **Linda Brown Thompson & Cheryl Brown Henderson**
Plaintiffs in the landmark 1954 school desegregation case of Brown v. Board of Education
April 30, 2004
 7:30 p.m. | Montante Cultural Center

For more information on the program, visit the Canisius College Web site at canisius.edu/oishei/dierenfield.asp

Trace your family history by visiting ancestry.com or africanancestry.com