

Walk in her Footsteps - E4

[00:00:00] **Kate Clifford Larson:** Everything about her life was about freedom of course, her family, her faith, her strong, powerful faith that sustained her through her darkest hours and her community. Her life is defined by those things and her pursuit of equality and justice and self determination. She was an entrepreneur. She had her own home.

[00:00:30] **Kate Clifford Larson:** She wanted that for everybody. These are things that makes Tubman timeless, and those are the stories that are important to tell about her.

[00:00:39] **Beonca Louis:** There's a small blue sign right outside the gates of Harriet Tubman's home. It's easy to miss if you're not paying attention. The sign reads Harriet Tubman, Moses of her people, served the underground railroad, frequented the site after the Civil War.

[00:00:58] **Beonca Louis:** It feels like there aren't [00:01:00] enough words to describe the fullness of Harriet's life in Auburn, the community she built here, the people she helped, the people who helped her, the land she nurtured, the movements for freedom, justice, and liberation she led. But if you look closer, her legacy and presence are everywhere.

[00:01:19] **Beonca Louis:** They touch every corner of Auburn and even go beyond it.

[00:01:28] **Beonca Louis:** Welcome to Walk in her Footsteps, Harriet Tubman's life in Auburn, New York, a series exploring Harriet Tubman's life after slavery in her chosen home in the north. I'm Beonca Louis, an entrepreneur and brand ambassador for Cayuga Tourism here in Auburn. In this episode, we ground ourselves in the present to understand Harriet Tubman's legacy and the way her life continues to touch the hearts, minds, and [00:02:00] souls of so many. Today, it's not difficult to find references to Harriet Tubman in popular culture, whether it's a quote from her or a mention of her work on the underground railroad. From celebrities to politicians and even high school valedictorians, there are a lot of people who see themselves and find hope in Harriet Tubman's story.

[00:02:21] Alexander Hamilton stays on the saw buck, abolitionist, Harriet Tubman replaces Andrew Jackson on the face of the 20.

[00:02:31] Harriet Tubman. Uh, I think she models, you know, she was safe and secure. She got herself out of slavery and then 19 times kept going back to try to, uh, realizing that she could never be free until everyone is.

[00:02:42] **Beonca Louis:** But it wasn't always this way.

[00:02:45] **Kate Clifford Larson:** Way back in the early nineties, when I decided to go back to school Simmons college here in Boston to get my master's degree in women's history. And at the same time, my daughter Rebecca was in the second grade and she came home with one of those little Harriet Tubman [00:03:00] hero biographies. And I read it with her.

[00:03:02] **Kate Clifford Larson:** And while I knew Tubman, I didn't know that much about her as a real person, not just as a children's book subject. So I look for an adult biography and in the 1990s, the last one that had been written was 1943.

[00:03:17] **Beonca Louis:** That's Kate Clifford Larson, an author and historian.

[00:03:21] **Kate Clifford Larson:** And my professors were shocked. And so was I. So I started on a path of investigating her life. And here we are almost 30 years later, I'm still researching and writing about Harriet Tubman because she is so fascinating and we are continually finding new information about her extraordinary life.

[00:03:42] **Beonca Louis:** In 2003, Dr. Larson published a biography of Harriet Tubman, the first one that had been published in nearly six decades. And she says that while there's more and more about Harriet's life that's coming to the surface, the way we tell her story still [00:04:00] usually starts and stops with a really narrow sliver of her life.

[00:04:04] **Kate Clifford Larson:** Everybody focuses on her underground railroad work, which is magnificent and courageous and incredible and sets her apart from many people during that time period.

[00:04:15] **Kate Clifford Larson:** But I think people forget about the free Harriet who live 54 years in Auburn, and she continued to serve the community and the world.

[00:04:27] **Beonca Louis:** But there is so much more to Harriet, so much more.

[00:04:31] **Kate Clifford Larson:** She fought for equal rights for women and people of color. She fought for, um, access to healthcare. She struggled with food insecurity.

[00:04:39] **Kate Clifford Larson:** She took in people who had nothing into her home and provided shelter and food. She had a beautiful garden in Auburn and she would raise food and distribute it and bargain and trade with people. Children in Auburn used to love to run to her farm because they wanted to hear her stories about the underground railroad and the [00:05:00] civil war.

[00:05:01] **Kate Clifford Larson:** And before she would tell her stories, she would have them do chores around her farm. And then she would give them fruit or eggs from her chicken coop. And then they would sit on a fence and she would act out stories from the underground railroad and the civil war. How magnificent is that? Getting kids to do work?

[00:05:18] **Kate Clifford Larson:** They did it happily and then she shared her stories. The thing about Tubman is everything about her life was about freedom of course, her family, her faith, her strong, powerful faith that sustained her through her darkest hours and her community, her life is defined by those things and her pursuit of equality and justice and self determination.

[00:05:46] **Kate Clifford Larson:** She was an entrepreneur. She had her own home. She wanted that for everybody. These are things that makes Tubman timeless, and those are the stories that are important to tell about her.

[00:05:59] **Beonca Louis:** [00:06:00] It's these stories that help us get to know Harriet as a person, a human being, not just this larger than life figure that accomplished the impossible.

[00:06:09] **Beonca Louis:** These are the stories that show us who she was and invites us to understand her life in a more meaningful way, a way that honors everything that she did and all that she embodied.

[00:06:20] **Kate Clifford Larson:** The way I talk about her now is even different than I did 20 years ago. She had great literacy. And it was a very non-traditional literacy.

[00:06:29] **Kate Clifford Larson:** She could read that night sky and the forest and the fields and the water. She could read people and discern their character. Those are tremendous literacies that we do not traditionally give credit for, but we need to start doing that. That's one of the magnificent things about the way

she was raised and how she grew up on those landscapes in Maryland, created this woman that we're celebrating today.

[00:06:55] **Beonca Louis:** These are the stories about Harriet Tubman that we need to hear, [00:07:00] stories about Harriet the naturalist, stories about her deep connection to the land and the deep knowledge she had about ecology and wildlife. These are some of the stories the national park service is trying to preserve.

[00:07:15] **Ahna Wilson :** So we have the Harriet Tubman underground railroad national historical park in Maryland.

[00:07:20] **Ahna Wilson :** And then we have Harriet Tubman national historical park in Auburn, New York, which is in the finger lakes region of New York.

[00:07:28] **Beonca Louis:** Anha Wilson is the superintendent of the women's rights, national historical park and the Harriet Tubman national historic park, both a part of the national park service.

[00:07:40] **Ahna Wilson :** She's the only woman that is currently honored with two national park service sites in two different states in the United States.

[00:07:50] **Beonca Louis:** The park in Auburn, New York encompasses Harriet Tubman's farm and home on south street, which we've mentioned in previous episodes of the series. The Harriet Tubman [00:08:00] Underground Railroad National Historical Park on the other hand is located in Church Creek, Maryland on the Eastern shore, the place where Harriet grew up. It spans 17 acres and is meant to give visitors a chance to experience the natural landscape as Harriet would have. There are no monuments or structures honoring Harriet. Instead, visitors get to know her by walking the same land that she did.

[00:08:25] **Ahna Wilson :** They have a trail that goes through that is very well thought out. It's a circular trail and it leads you actually north. And the thought process was to take you through some of the native landscape and be able to get that feeling of what Harriet would've experienced and the landscape that she really loved.

[00:08:45] **Beonca Louis:** The landscape of Dorchester county in the Eastern shore of Maryland is full of wetlands, swamps, and forest. From a young age, Harriet spent a lot of time outdoors in nature. She was out in the marshes, checking [00:09:00] muskrat traps and in the timber fields with her father,

Harriet knew the land intimately. She was familiar with the plants, the animals, the birds, the waterways, the stars.

[00:09:12] **Beonca Louis:** Many years later, it would be this deep knowledge that would help her to successfully guide dozens to freedom on the underground railroad.

[00:09:24] **Beonca Louis:** What's so interesting about the life of Harriet Tubman isn't just that these beautiful, rich stories aren't being told, it's that sometimes people tell stories about her that aren't even true.

[00:09:37] **Kate Clifford Larson:** There were a lot of quotes that popped up in the 1990s and early two thousands that people quote, say, Tubman said these things like every dream begins with a dreamer.

[00:09:48] **Kate Clifford Larson:** That's totally fake. That was like 2007. Someone made that up. I could have saved a thousand slaves if only they knew they were slaves. She never said that ever. Can you imagine Harriet Tubman saying [00:10:00] people who were enslaved didn't know they were slaves? Every enslaved person wanted to be free. Let's be serious.

[00:10:08] **Kate Clifford Larson:** And they knew they were enslaved. So I don't know those quotes have a purpose. What, I'm not really sure because if we stick to what Tubman really said, they're powerful words. And they're her voice and her understanding of the world at the time. And some of the things she said are still very important today.

[00:10:29] **Kate Clifford Larson:** We don't have to make things up to make them relevant today. Cuz she was fighting those battles we're fighting today.

[00:10:36] **Beonca Louis:** WWHD, what would Harriet do? I feel like that's probably already exist on a t-shirt or sticker or something, but really there are so many ways that we can connect ourselves to the life and legacy of Harriet Tubman and find lessons in the way she fought for liberation and justice. She can be a lifeline for us, and a reminder that [00:11:00] in community, anything is possible.

[00:11:02] **Beonca Louis:** And that is exactly what Harriet became for motivational speaker, artists and activists, Juhanna Rogers. One afternoon, Juhanna and her colleague were having their usual lunch session, this time at a Mexican spot in east Indianapolis.

[00:11:19] **Dr. Juhanna Rogers:** We decided to talk about why we're here. We were artists first and we're putting ourselves through this process.

[00:11:25] **Dr. Juhanna Rogers:** Maybe she was from new Orleans. Me from Jersey. And I'm like, we could have definitely been home, probably doing something a lot more rewarding, or at least it would feel that way at the time. And somehow in the midst of this conversation, we started talking about our mentors and now they were pouring so much into us and we began to make the analogy between or compare Harriet's decision to go back to free other people when she was already free and what that process must have been like for her. And it probably wasn't an easy process. It [00:12:00] probably was a lot of trying days where she could have chose to do something else with her freedom, but she decided to go back. I think that was the first moment that I can remember in recent history that I decided to pour the spirit of her into my work.

[00:12:15] **Beonca Louis:** Juhanna founded the Tubman Troop, a performance group made up of black women, committed to telling stories for, about and with black women at the center. The group first met in 2018 as cast members in a performance of Tozake Shange's, "For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide/When The Rainbow Is Enuf," at the Auburn Public Theater.

[00:12:38] **Dr. Juhanna Rogers:** The Harriet Tubman troop showed up at a special time in my life. It was therapy on stage. And I think through that experience and the original cast, that was a part of that, each of the women came bringing something, but also in need of, of something. And I think the community we found together on the stage, again, coming from [00:13:00] all different places, showing up in all different phases of our lives.

[00:13:04] **Dr. Juhanna Rogers:** And it gave me, I think the space to really wrestle with experiences that I had been through that I didn't even know were still impacting me so deeply. And that's the magic of theater, right? When the words and the energy and the story of a piece really connects not just with the audience, but she was a character.

[00:13:25] **Dr. Juhanna Rogers:** And I think that happened for many of us that was a part of that cast. And we were like, how can we do this again? How can we do this again?

[00:13:31] **Beonca Louis:** The Tubman troop did a few more runs of "For Colored Girls..." and started thinking and talking about what sorts of stories they wanted to tell next. A year later, the troop performed "A Gathering Place," at the Auburn Public Theater.

[00:13:44] **Beonca Louis:** The play was written and directed by Juhanna and follows a group of black women living in the same Brooklyn apartment building as they navigate life's ups and downs.

[00:13:54] **Dr. Juhanna Rogers:** I think the Harriet Tubman Troop gave us the space to own [00:14:00] who we are. It gave us the space to say that our stories on stage makes sense and they are just as powerful as anything else.

[00:14:09] **Beonca Louis:** If you were to meet Harriet Tubman today, what would you say to her?

[00:14:13] **Dr. Juhanna Rogers:** Something to the effect of, do you know that your life has blazed a trail has inspired so many people like your work has not stopped, it has only transformed. And there are people that are committed to, to doing that freedom work, cuz it's still necessary.

[00:14:39] **Beonca Louis:** The world Harriet Tubman lived in is different from the world we live in today, but still while a lot has changed a lot hasn't. The fight for freedom and justice that Harriet Tubman started isn't over. It's ongoing, carried forward by people who believe that another world is possible, people like [00:15:00] Vanessa Garrison.

[00:15:01] **Vanessa Garrison:** Over 10 years ago, I founded GirlTrek with my dear friend Morgan.

[00:15:06] **Beonca Louis:** Girl Trek's tagline is take a walk, join a movement. And that's a pretty good description of what the nonprofit does. They mobilize black women and girls to walk for health and healing.

[00:15:19] **Vanessa Garrison:** When Morgan and I came together to launch this movement was really about the healing of black women and overcoming the systemic barriers that keep us unwell. We looked to Harriett Tubman for inspiration. We looked to her for inspiration because she was a woman who literally walked herself to freedom. We always like to remind women that Harriet Tubman was a living, breathing woman, just like us. She stood just over five feet tall.

[00:15:42] **Vanessa Garrison:** She was flesh and bone. She wasn't a magical caricature. And I think of anything, that's the misconception that Harriet Tubman, somehow has had some magical superpower that we all didn't have. Today we are over a million black women who walk every single day in our

neighborhoods [00:16:00] to reclaim our health, to inspire our daughters and to organize around the issues that matter most to us.

[00:16:08] **Beonca Louis:** GirlTrek created something called the Tubman Doctrine, a list of four guiding principles that draw on Harriet Tubman's life and legacy to anchor the organization's work.

[00:16:19] **Vanessa Garrison:** A liberation doctrine, which is what we call it.

[00:16:22] **Beonca Louis:** Step one.

[00:16:24] **Vanessa Garrison:** Never ask permission to save your own life, to go now, right now in the direction of everything that fills you up and brings you joy. And don't wait for anyone. That's what Harriet taught us. The second step is really important. Once you learn the way, come back and get a sister. What we know about Harriet Tubman is she walked herself to freedom on that first journey, almost 90 miles alone, but that why we call her name today is because she was courageous enough to go back over and over and over again.

[00:16:51] **Vanessa Garrison:** And then the GirlTrek movement, we tell women that you first probably have to start your walking journey alone. Everybody isn't ready when you're ready. But then when you've created a [00:17:00] habit, when you filled your cup up, when you feel strong enough that it's your obligation to go back and organize other women so they can start walking too.

[00:17:08] **Vanessa Garrison:** Step three of the doctrine is something that Harriet taught us through the abolitionist movement and something that's really represented in the city of Auburn, new York.

[00:17:16] **Beonca Louis:** Vanessa is referring to the network of abolitionists in Auburn who were Harriet's co-conspirators in the fight for liberation.

[00:17:24] **Vanessa Garrison:** Just like those network abolitionists helped Harriet Tubman, GirlTrek has a network of people who help us and we believe that healing happens in community.

[00:17:33] **Beonca Louis:** And finally, step four.

[00:17:35] **Vanessa Garrison:** The most important step of all, find joy. We say that Harriet Tubman lived to be almost 90 something years old. She planted an apple tree. She adopted children. She started a home for the aged.

[00:17:48] **Vanessa Garrison:** She lived almost 50 plus years as a free woman in Auburn, New York. And that's the inspiration that she didn't let her experiences break her down or stop her from connecting with the bigger, broader purpose of this life. [00:18:00]

[00:18:01] **Beonca Louis:** This year on Harriet Tubman Day, which happens on March 10th annually and coinciding with the 200th anniversary of Tubman's birth, Vanessa and GirlTrek led a huge walk right here in Auburn.

[00:18:16] **Vanessa Garrison:** I was able to lead a walk from the heritage center to her home and back. So it felt really amazing to literally walk on the ground where she had walked and do it in community with other women. We walked to her grave. We honored her with libations, with pastor Paris Price from Harriet Tubman AME church.

[00:18:36] **Vanessa Garrison:** And it was just a really beautiful time. It was dreamy. There's a spiritual energy in the air. That's really palpable. And it's an energy of both do goodness of people who you can tell really want to do good and are invest in their communities and are really proud of what their community has birthed for this country.

[00:18:57] **Vanessa Garrison:** And I really felt that there, and then there was just a [00:19:00] genuine kindness, a different pace to life, and maybe most importantly, a really invested network of people who were invested in keeping the stories alive in that community. And so I loved every minute of being there.

[00:19:18] **Beonca Louis:** Like we mentioned at the beginning of this episode, Harriet Tubman's presence and impact can be felt everywhere in Auburn. She's memorialized in buildings with statues and other material markers of her time here. But one of the most important ways Harriet's spirit is being carried on today is through people, through the everyday Auburnians who live out the values of Harriet's freedom work, day in and day out.

[00:19:46] **Gwen Weber McLeod :** My name is Gwen Weber McLeod, and I am the president and CEO of a private sector and leadership development corporation. That's incorporated in my name. My company's name is Gwen Inc. And for the purpose of the introductions, I [00:20:00] would like to say that I'm proud and honored to think of myself as being Harriet Tubman's legacy in action.

[00:20:07] **Gwen Weber McLeod :** Another thing is that I'm absolutely the proud mother of Ashley McLeod.

[00:20:12] **Ashley McLeod:** Hi, my name's Ashley McLeod. I'm a social worker. I currently own a lifestyle brand called In Our Words, we use our products to help women walk their authentic walk by using bold statements.

[00:20:26] **Melody Smith Johnson:** My name is Melody Smith Johnson. I am the owner and the founder of Divine Coverings, which is a women empowerment brand.

[00:20:35] **Melody Smith Johnson:** This summer we'll be opening a space in Auburn, New York called melodies. Which is designed to be a center point, a place where women entrepreneurs can come to be embraced and elevated and educated to live their wildest dreams.

[00:20:52] **Beonca Louis:** Gwen, Ashley and Melody are all black women entrepreneurs in Auburn. They're also part of Harriet's [00:21:00] story in this city. They're creating businesses and community resources that reflect many of the same values that Harriet was anchored in. They empower women, building spaces and tools to support folks fully stepping into their power. In their own unique way, each of these three women is reaching back into history and bringing some of Harriet's magic into the 21st century.

[00:21:26] **Melody Smith Johnson:** Of course, I knew about Harriet Tubman since a little girl, but really having my feet on the ground where she walked breathing the air I know that she breathed, right. Meeting her descendants, talking with those who have her blood running through their veins connects me to the history that I know that I learned about as a child. And it inspires me to know, listen that if Harriet did it, that I could do it, right. I come to the place to know that the connectivity to what I read in the history pages is right here today. [00:22:00] And it gives me the boldness to know that my birth right by the virtue that I'm standing on this ground, that I'm breathing this air

[00:22:07] **Melody Smith Johnson:** gives me the right to be who I need to be. And I don't have to ask permission to do it. I don't have to ask permission to be it. We're living her legacy.

[00:22:18] **Ashley McLeod:** I'm honored to be from Auburn. I'm honored that she lives here. I'm honored that I got to know more about who she is because she inspires me every day to just keep moving.

[00:22:31] **Ashley McLeod:** Even when people might try to put doubt on your heart, to just keep doing what God's calling you to do.

[00:22:39] **Beonca Louis:** There's so much more to be said, but I'll leave it at this; Auburn, New York is a special place and to know Auburn is to know Harriet Tubman.

[00:22:53] **Beonca Louis:** Thank you so much for listening to Walk in her Footsteps and for walking this journey with me.[00:23:00]

[00:23:00] **Beonca Louis:** I would like to thank my guests, Kate Clifford Larson, historian, and author of "Bound for the Promised Land - Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero." Juhanna Rogers, motivational speaker, artist, activist, and co-founder of the Tubman Troop, Vanessa Garrison co-founder and COO of GirlTrek, Anha Wilson, national park service superintendent of the woman's rights, national historical park and the Harriet Tubman national historical park in Auburn, New York. And Auburn entrepreneurs,

[00:23:39] **Beonca Louis:** Gwen Weber McLeod, Ashley McLeod, and Melody Smith Johnson.

[00:23:51] **Beonca Louis:** Walk in her Footsteps is produced by Whetstone Media in partnership with Tour Cayuga.. Thank you to the Walk in her Footsteps [00:24:00] team, lead producer Tonina Saputo, managing producer, Marvin Yueh, audio editor, Martinho Cardoso, and associate producer. Danya AbdelHamid. Tour Cayuga would like to thank the Auburn community who carries on Harriet Tubman's legacy.

[00:24:18] **Beonca Louis:** For more information on Harriet Tubman's legacy in New York, visit TourCayuga.com. I'd also like to thank Whestone founder, Stephen Satterfield, Whestone Radio Collective head of podcast, Celine Glasier, sound engineer, Max Kotelchuck, music director, Catherine Yang, associate producer, Quentin Lebeau, production coordinator,

[00:24:42] **Beonca Louis:** Shabnam Ferdowsi, and sound intern, Simon Lavender. Cover art created by Whestone art director, Alexandra Bowman. You can learn more about all things happening at Whestone at WhestoneMagazine.com. I'm Beonca Louis and thank you for listening.[00:25:00]