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REMINDER

◆ Community News ◆

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Slavery workshop at Cheney Library passes on rich oral history and quilting traditions to area youth

By MARYELLEN APFELQUIST
 Staff Writer



More than a quilt. Tammy Richardson (l) and daughter Brianna display their quilt — telling the story of “The Selfish Lion and the Cunning Rabbit” — made by Richardson’s mother, Allie Gipson, who will be 71 in April.

Photo by Maryellen Apfelquist.

MANCHESTER — Local museum educator and storyteller Tammy Richardson remembers her great grandmother well. A former Mississippi slave who lived to be 125 years old, Mary Lee Baxter (Johnson) passed on her rich storytelling tradition to Richardson — seven years old at the time — who shared the art with Manchester children and families at a special workshop at Cheney Library last Thursday afternoon.

“The workshop focuses on the storytelling tradition of the enslaved, who passed the sto-

ries on to their children,” said Richardson in her introduction. “They’d also make quilts to tell stories.”

“Learning to read and write was illegal in the south [for slaves],” explained Richardson to the group, stressing the importance of storytelling and quilting as the slaves’ vital means of communication.

The stories were often told to teach lessons, continued Richardson, who, with the help of her daughter Brianna and family friend Brandon Phyll, performed a skit to illustrate her point.

Their performance, “The Selfish (See “Oral,” page 3)

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— Lion and the Cunning Rabbit,” a tale also depicted in a quilt made by Allie Gipson, Richardson’s mother, taught those present that just because you’re small, it doesn’t mean you can’t think your way through a potentially dangerous or risky situation.

Richardson is descended from a long line of women who have kept slavery storytelling traditions alive.

“She was so full of energy,” said Richardson of her great grandmother Mary Lee, who was “of marrying season” when the slaves were announced free.

This would have made Mary Lee 13 or 14 years old, explained Richardson. “We estimated how old she was, because no records were ever kept [for the slaves].”

Born in Mississippi, Richardson

instructs children through stories of colonial history, slavery and native American history. She specializes in reenactments featuring important, yet “obscured,” women in history — including Bessie Coleman, the first African-American pilot, Elizabeth Keckley, a former slave who resided with the Lincolns at the White House, and Margru, an Amistad captive.

Richardson will be featured on Cox Cable public access television in an interview with the Dushoff’s Zita Christian, to be aired in early March.

For more information, or to schedule a performance or workshop, please contact Richardson at tdc35@yahoo.com or 299-6090.



Pass it on. Tammy Richardson (center), daughter Brianna (r) and Brandon Phyll (l) performed a skit to illustrate the quilting and oral history traditions of slaves, at Cheney Library on Feb. 23.

Photo by Maryellen Apfelquist.