



Mia Anderson's Reflection on Her Ancestor Josiah Henson

Mia Anderson is the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of Reverend Josiah Henson. She shares her family's knowledge and admiration for Henson's legacy, which includes helping enslaved individuals escape and establishing the Dawn Settlement, a place where freed Blacks could learn trades and rebuild their lives. She also addresses the controversy surrounding Henson's portrayal in Uncle Tom's Cabin, which misrepresented his story. Anderson highlights the need to correct the false and derogatory usage of the term "Uncle Tom" and emphasizes the true strength, faith, and dedication exhibited by her ancestor. Reported by Juleyka Lantigua.

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- Pamela Kirkland: I am Pamela Kirkland, a reporter and producer. The conversation around reparations can seem both overwhelming and contradictory. On one hand, it's hard to imagine how our country could ever fully atone for the centuries of injustice and atrocities committed against Black and brown citizens. On the other hand, there's the belief that reparations are not only achievable, but essential to healing and moving forward. What we know is that reparations are owed to the descendants of the enslaved, and frankly, the bill is past due.
- Juleyka Lantigua.: Hi everybody. This is Juleyka Lantigua, the founder of LWC Studios and the creator of the series. I am dropping by to introduce this episode because this is one of a couple of episodes that basically resulted from me learning that my house had been built on a former plantation. There are several episodes dedicated to this misadventure. One is an interview with the curator of the Josiah Henson Museum, who is the former enslaved person who became internationally known abolitionist, who labored along with his mother on the plantation. And this episode is an interview with his great-great-great-great-granddaughter, Mia Anderson, who continues his legacy of service and uplifting. So I hope you enjoy this interview with Mia Anderson. Thanks for listening. Welcome to the show, Mia Anderson, it's so great to have you. Thank you for being here.
- Anderson: Thank you for having me.
- Lantigua: All right. I know who you are, but tell our listeners who you are and your amazing link to U.S. and Canadian history.
- Anderson: Well, I'm Mia Anderson. I'm originally born in Detroit, Michigan. I am a four times great-granddaughter of the Reverend Josiah Henson.
- Lantigua: So at the top of the episode, I did a little bit of an intro about who he is because he is quite literally from my neighborhood. He was raised on a plantation in my neighborhood, and he was a really well known abolitionist in my state of Maryland. But how did you come to learn about him? Do you recall that?

Anderson: I can't say I recall per se. And I say that because I've never not known, and I can speak for much of my family. We've never not known. It's like you grow up knowing who your parents are. You grow up knowing who your grandparents are. And so I've always known that Josiah Henson was my great-great-great-grandfather. We always knew that he helped individuals escape slavery, that he built this Dawn Settlement, and this was a settlement where individuals who were free were able to come and learn a trade and get themselves together along with their families and move on. And so we always admired that strength, but it was just kind of instilled in us. This is who he was and this is the legacy he left us behind.

Lantigua: Was there ever pressure from elders to say, "You have to amount to something, look at the legacy that you come from." Was his name ever invoked like that? To sort of say, "Listen, you come from an amazing person, an amazing legacy, you better live up to it."

Anderson: Not maybe in those terms, however, we call him Father Henson, what I think he really handed down was that love, that faith, that tenacity. And so although it wasn't used exactly like that, I think it was indirectly used because we got to really see that. We just didn't get to hear it. We got to see our grandparents and great-grandparents really live that legacy out. And so that within itself inspired us to do better, to want to be better, to be kind, to be gracious, to be faithful, and then continue to hand that down to our younger generation, our siblings, our cousins.

Lantigua: So I'm a believer, I'm a Christian, and I am very privileged to be able to recognize when people are anointed. There's a very real mark on their lives. And the more that I've learned about him, the more it was very clear that he was someone who was anointed, someone who had been chosen for a very specific mission. And I'm sensing that that carried through with your family, but there's also a little bit of controversy because a very famous book was basically cribbed and his story was essentially stolen and made into something that it wasn't. Can you just give us a little bit of context about that from your perspective?

Anderson: From my perspective, I'll tell you, I went through different stages. And so as a kid, we knew we were descendants of this wonderful guy who did some unimaginable things by risking his life on numerous occasions to help free others from slavery. And so as I started getting older and hearing the term Uncle Tom being used in such a derogatory manner, I began to question what's true, what's not true. I knew the foundation that was built for me, but growing up and hearing people use this term so negative, it just made me wonder what's real and what's not real. And so you begin to question as a kid. And so I went through a phase where I think I might have even been a little embarrassed. At one point I was proud to be a descendant. At one point, I wasn't sure. And it was during those kind of formative years where you're trying to get your stance in life and you're in middle school and you're hearing this and you're like, "Are they talking about the Uncle Tom that I'm related to? And why are they saying these things?"

And so you go back and you ask these questions, and what you realize is that they've been misguided, right? Misinformed. And so at a very early age, I began to recognize that, of course, with the support of family and continuing to instill, "No, that's not the truth. This is the truth." And Uncle Tom at one point really meant good. And so as I began to come into adulthood, the question was what can I do

as a descendant to protect our legacy? What can I do as a descendant to protect our inheritance?

I'm talking about the inheritance that he left with us as a powerful individual who really made a mark in this history that has been minimized or has not been recognized like it should. And so I still cringe to this day when I'm watching movies or I'm watching a series or something on TV where that term is used to really insult someone because that's not the meaning. And every chance I get, I'll tell you, even if it's on social media and I see someone use that term, I'm like typing because I want to inform, but I want to inform in a very respectful manner.

Lantigua: All right, let's have you do it right here. Let's correct the record. What is it that you need us to understand about this "Uncle Tom" and the characterization that has followed?

Anderson: I want people to understand that that's false. The stereotypical way that Uncle Tom is currently being used is absolutely false. And I want individuals to do the research for themselves, but I also want them to understand that his name means strength. He was a man of enormous faith, integrity, love. He was dedicated and he was very concerned about his people and helping free them from slavery to the point where he literally risked his own life by saving over 100 slaves and helping them gain freedom.

I want individuals to understand that this name once was a positive name, and over the years somehow became to be used in a very derogatory manner. And so when you're using that name, do you really know what you're calling someone when you're referring to them as an Uncle Tom? The legacy he left was so powerful. We often get asked as a family, "What's the legacy?" And I think the legacy is literally a living inheritance, that he left for us. I think it's a power in knowing that I'm a descendant and that blood runs through me, it kind of gives me a power to tap into when I need to, when I need to be lifted, when I need to find that strength within. But the power of his thought, of his mindset, of his phase, I think those are qualities that we use each and every day still to today.

Lantigua: I love it. That's a fantastic way to end. Mia, thank you so much for making time, and we're just so excited to have you as part of the series.

Kirkland: Special thanks to Mia Anderson for joining us in this conversation.

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