

Stafford family takes in stranded motorists

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

It was sunrise on Jan. 4 and Alcenia Smith, her daughter Cheyanne Cannon, her two sisters and her two young granddaughters had been stranded in their car on Brooke Road in Stafford County overnight.

They had consumed the supply of snacks and water that was supposed to last them the rest of the way home to New York. They'd left North Carolina, where they were visiting family for the holidays, the day before and they were still dressed for balmy 74-degree weather when they drove straight into a snowstorm, Smith said.

They stopped in Fredericksburg to fill up their gas tank and instead of taking them back to Interstate 95, GPS routed them to Brooke Road.

"We're from New York—you know, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere—but there was tons of ice on the road and we felt the tires slipping and ended up getting stuck in the road," Smith said.

They had no cell service and could pick up no Wi-Fi signal. They called 911 and were told that everything was shut down because of the storm.

"That right there was a



PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Craig and Stefanie Hughes invited two dozen stranded motorists to stay in their Brooke Road home in Stafford.

little scary," Smith said. "We were on a secluded back road in an area we didn't know and we were six Black women in a predominantly white area. That raised fear because we didn't know the area."

Smith, her two sisters and Cannon slept in shifts through the night and when morning came, Cannon decided to walk up the road to find something for her daughters to eat.

"She said, 'Ma, my girls have to eat,'" Smith said.

Cannon was struggling through a foot of snow in sneakers along a road with

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no sidewalk when she heard a voice asking, “Do you need help? Is everything OK?”

The voice belonged to Stefanie Hughes, a special education teacher at Mountain View High School.

Hughes and her husband, Craig, happened to be outside early that morning attempting to help a car that had gotten stuck in their driveway.

“I started to sort of see this exodus of people walking up Brooke Road—this very fast, dangerous road that no one walks on,” Stefanie Hughes said. “We looked just down the hill and we could see there was a big semi truck jack-knifed across the road and at least 10 other vehicles stuck behind them, where they’d been since 8 or 9 p.m. the night before.”

Hughes didn’t stop to think. She invited the first family she encountered—a single mother traveling with her 4-year-old and her grandmother—into her house.

“I said, come inside, we’ve got the back room warm and you can get what you need,” Hughes said. “Then I got my son to walk with me and we encountered another young woman walking up the road with tears streaming down her face. She said, ‘I don’t know where I am and I don’t want to be in the car anymore.’”

That was Cannon. Hughes and her son Craig—a junior at Stafford High School—accompanied Cannon back to the car, where Smith and the rest of the family were waiting.

“The gesture that confirmed to me that this family were angels on earth was that Craig came up and offered his help and he asked for [my granddaughter’s] permission to approach her or touch her,” Smith said. “That shows the kind of parents he has. That touched my soul.”

The Hughes family ended up taking three families—a total of 24 people—into their home that day.

They set up air mattresses, and borrowed army cots and trundle beds for everyone. They kept their generator going to heat the entire house as much as possible and



Charis Hughes of Stafford and Taylor Williams of Long Island, N.Y., became friends.

lit fires in every fireplace. They cooked beef stew, spaghetti and meatballs and waffles on a hot plate on a single burner for everyone.

They loaned extra cold weather gear to the visiting children so everyone could play in the snow together.

The families stayed with Hughes for two days until crews were able to clear Brooke Road.

“You don’t receive that treatment sometimes from your own family, let alone from complete strangers of the opposite race,” Smith said. “There’s nothing in life I can do to repay them. You don’t get that level of kindness anymore, especially in this topsy-turvy world.”

Hughes and her husband have five biological children and one adopted child, and have been therapeutic foster parents to about 26 other children over 15 years. She believes divine intervention was involved in leading her to Smith, Cannon and the other families.

“I’m so grateful that we had gone out and checked on [the car stuck in their driveway],” she said. “I don’t know if we would have seen them otherwise. I’m so devastated that they were down the road from us all night long in this scary, strange place.”

All the families have stayed in touch since leaving the Hughes home. Hughes’ daughter Charis and Cannon’s daughter Taylor call each other “best friends” and talk on the phone for hours several times a week, Smith said, and Smith is planning to bring the entire Hughes family to visit her in Long Island this sum-



Cheyenne Cannon and her daughter, Christen, rest after dinner at the Hughes family home.

mer.

Hughes said the experience reminded her of lines from “A Christmas Carol” by Charles Dickens, which she had just read with students in her class.

In one passage, a character describes Christmas as a time “when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people ... as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave.”

“We all are fellow travelers to the grave,” Hughes said. “No matter what your system of belief is, we are in this together, shoulder-to-shoulder, and we are all going to get caught in the storm. No one is immune to that.”

“We just happened to have the opportunity at the time to offer shelter, but honestly, I’ve traveled alone with my children before, and I would pray someone would do the same for me,” she continued.

Stefanie Hughes said her family was blessed by being able to provide for others.

Several days after the early January snow storm, weather forecasters were predicting another snowfall, and Hughes was ready to take in more stranded motorists.

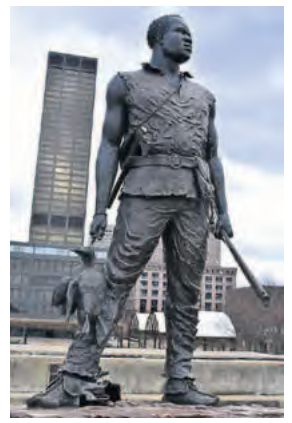
When that didn’t happen, Hughes joked around with Smith, Cannon and the other families she’d taken in.

“I told them, ‘You guys, it snowed here the other night and nobody showed up at my door. It was totally boring!’” Hughes said. “Because that was one of the best snowed-in experiences I’ve had in my life.”

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LEWIS AND CLARK WERE NOT ALONE

Local effort to recognize Black explorer



DON SNIEGOWSKI / CREATIVE COMMONS

This statue honoring York stands in Louisville, Kentucky.



PHOTOS BY TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Carolyn Davis, the president of Historic Port Royal, stands in the Port Royal Museum of American History. She is leading the effort to recognize York, an enslaved American explorer.

BY ADELE UPHAUS-CONNER
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

In 1770, on a farm in what is now Caroline County, a man was born who played a key part in Lewis and Clark's famed 1803–06 Expedition to the Pacific.

This man was a hunter and carried a firearm, could swim and, having an understanding of natural remedies, took care of members of the expedition when they grew ill.

He went on scouting trips and had an equal vote with other team members on important decisions, such as where to build a fort to overwinter on the Oregon coast.

He was admired by the Native Americans and helped make successful trades with them. Two geographic features—a series of islands and a creek—were named after him.

Yet unlike every other man who accompanied William Clark and Meriwether Lewis on the historic voyage, he did not receive the U.S. government's reward of double pay and 320 acres of land.

That's because this man—who



Literature about Lewis and Clark and the lesser-known York, a key member of the expedition who was owned by William Clark.

had only one name, York—was enslaved by Clark, willed to him in 1799 by his father, who owned York's parents.

"Years ago, we acknowledged [York in Caroline County,] but not to the degree we need to today," said Carolyn Davis, president of Historic Port Royal.

Davis, a retired school princi-

pal, is also the Caroline County chair for the Virginia Lewis and Clark Legacy Trail, or VLCLT, which was initiated in 2010 and crosses the state, marking places and events that played a role in the expedition.

Three years ago, trail organizers began raising funds to

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support extending the trail, adding new signs and updating existing ones. This year, the General Assembly approved a budget amendment funding the fabrication and installation of four highway markers and directional signs to support the trail.

Caroline County is one of the four localities that will submit applications to the Virginia Department of Historic Resources and Virginia Department of Transportation for the funds. According to a press release from the VLCLT, the money will be used to replace the existing highway marker for York, which was installed in 2009 on U.S. 1 near the intersection with Lady-smith Road.

Davis will work with the VLCLT and the Department of Historic Resources to write the text for the new marker.

The existing marker mentions York's birth on the farm of William Clark's family, the fact that he was the only Black member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the fact that he received no rewards for his participation because of his status as an enslaved person.

But Davis said the marker should acknowledge more of York's accomplishments with the Corps of Discovery, as well as the known facts about what happened to him after the expedition.

"We want to make sure what's there is correctly done," she said.

According to historian, author and speaker Hasan Davis—who wrote a children's book about York and portrays him in living history performances—York enjoyed freedom and equality on the expedition.

Journals kept by crew members show that York was greatly respected by everyone.

"If you look at the journals, it's estimated there are about one million words of text all written by white men who were indoctrinated in white supremacy, and not one time was there a negative, derisive or ugly stereotypical statement made about York," Davis said. "Just that absence was more powerful than anything and that led me to dig deep into his story."

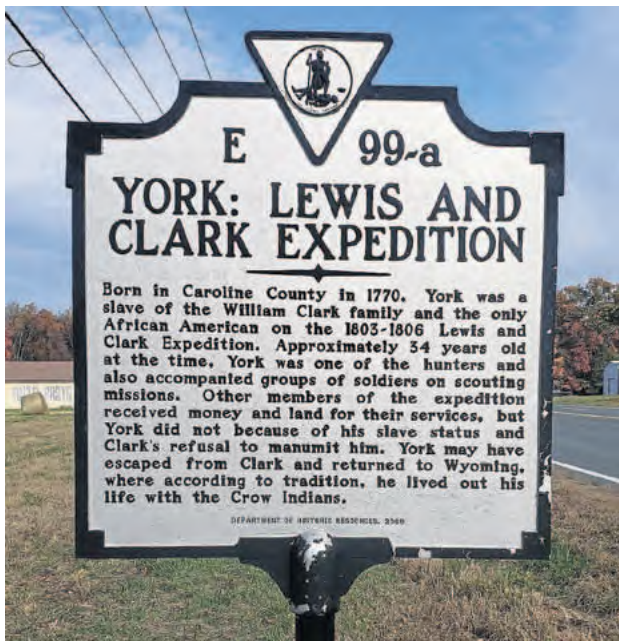
Indigenous leaders who Davis spoke to during his research told him that York was admired and respected by the Native Americans as well.

"He made an impact and he created opportunities [with the Native Americans] where there wouldn't have been any," Davis said. "These were very sophisticated communities with their own economic systems and many of them were under-



TRISTAN LOREI / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Carolyn Davis stands outside the Port Royal Museum of American History.



VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HISTORIC RESOURCES

Davis, a local historian, says a new historical marker about York should focus on his accomplishments.

impressed by the crew, but because York was so unique, he created unique opportunities."

York was a valued and trusted member of the Corps of Discovery, working side-by-side with the other members of the group. His contributions were innumerable during the 28-month journey.

—CAROLYN DAVIS

York's presence may have gone so far as to keep the entire team alive. Davis said indigenous leaders told him, "You need to know that the only reason we didn't kill them all was because we heard about him."

"His impact was so much more than just, 'the guy carrying the bags for William Clark,'" Davis said.

The respect that York received during the expedition made returning to enslavement unbearable for him, Davis said.

Clark and York grew up together in Virginia and later Kentucky, which at the time was Virginia's

western frontier. York served as Clark's personal servant and the two were companions for decades—they were in their mid-30s at the time of the expedition—yet Clark was never able to see him as an equal, Davis said.

There are no official papers showing that Clark ever granted York his freedom, he said.

Clark did allow York to go to Louisville, Kentucky to be near his wife, but wrote to his brother, "if any attempt is made by York to run off, or refuse to [perform] his duty as a Slave, I wish him Sent to New Orleans and Sold, or hired out to Some Severe master [until] he thinks better of Such Conduct."

Clark later told the writer Washington Irving that he freed York 10 years after the expedition, but that his life as a free man was a failure due to his own laziness. He claimed that York set out to return to his master but died of cholera and was buried in an unmarked grave.

"Is this account accurate, or is Clark using racist stereotyping of the era to justify why York never should have been free at all?" Davis asked in an article he wrote about York for the National Park Service.

Another account from a fur trader who wrote about his years in the western territories, describes encountering a Black man who claimed to be York living among a band of Crow Indians in today's Wyoming.

"He lost his wife and family and maybe he decided to go out there and live his second best life," Davis said. "He found that place where he had been welcomed and valued. He was a competent frontiersman. He knew the rivers and the waters. Everything about it shows it's something he could have done."

However he ended his days, York's history-making accomplishments as the first Black man to cross the continent as part of an important voyage of discovery deserve to be celebrated and shared, Carolyn Davis said.

"York was a valued and trusted member of the Corps of Discovery, working side-by-side with the other members of the group," she said. "His contributions were innumerable during the 28-month journey."

Historic Port Royal and the Caroline County Historical Society will hold a joint meeting on Sunday, Aug. 14, at 2 p.m. at Caroline County Community Services Center in Milford. The groups will discuss the legacy trail project and hear a presentation from Peggy Crosson, president of VLCLT.

"We would like to compliment Mrs. Davis—she has jumped on board serving as the county chair for Caroline and she is also trying to coordinate and engage other counties that have Lewis and Clark connections, like Spotsylvania," Crosson said.

The Lewis and Clark legacy trail hopes to install more than 40 new signs in the next 10 years.

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Local icon Johnny Johnson dies

Beloved artist, philanthropist, teacher passes away at age 86

ADELE UPHAUS

The Free Lance-Star

Johnny P. Johnson, who for more than 60 years inspired the Fredericksburg community as an artist, humanitarian, philanthropist, teacher, mentor and coach, died early Saturday morning at the age of 86.

“He served as an example of what a successful professional artist looks like, but also what a decent human being should be,” said one of Johnson’s many mentees, the Georgia-based artist Ayokunle Odeleye. “Johnny P. Johnson served as an example of how to treat each other regardless of difference. I don’t think there is a church in Fredericksburg [big enough] to hold a funeral for this man.”

Fredericksburg Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw, who taught with Johnson at James Monroe High School in the late 1960s and maintained a friendship with him ever since, said he “made everyone whose life he touched better by knowing him.”

“I don’t even know how to start talking about someone who absolutely lived his faith and belief in humankind,” Greenlaw said.

Gaye Adegbalola, who also taught with Johnson, said she has been “in and out of tears all day.”

“Not because he passed, but because this world doesn’t have



Well-wishers greet Johnson at the close of an event kicking off ‘Celebrate Johnny P. Johnson Day’ at Shiloh Baptist Church Old Site in 2018.

him anymore,” she said. “Oh, he was so good. He was just so good.”

Johnson was born in North Carolina in 1936 to a mother who worked as a domestic and a father who was a mill worker. His artistic calling was clear from his earliest years.

“He shared with us once that when he was very young, he used to sit in church and sketch in the air,” said Janice Davies, a lifelong friend and fellow member of Shiloh Baptist Church Old Site. “He painted a picture of so many things. He painted life as he went along.”

Johnson attended Virginia State University, where he played basketball, becoming captain and eventually earning a spot in the VSU Sports Hall of Fame. He would also receive a master’s degree in fine arts from Howard University and completed additional studies at the Corcoran School of Art.

He arrived in Fredericksburg in 1959 and started teaching at Walker-Grant School, the city’s first publicly funded school for Black students.

The town was deeply segregated and there was limited hous-

ing available for Black teachers, so the tradition was for them to live with a student’s family, said Xavier Richardson, senior vice president and chief corporate development officer at Mary Washington Healthcare and a lifelong friend of Johnson’s.

Johnson lived with the Bridges family and taught sixth grade. Richardson’s future wife, LaZalia Bridges, was in the first class he ever taught and would talk about how all the sixth-grade girls were “crazy” about this “young, attractive” new teacher.

In addition to teaching all subjects to his sixth-grade class, Johnson also taught a high school art class, coached basketball and served as an assistant principal for no additional pay.

Johnson told The Free Lance-Star earlier this year that he only intended to teach for a year and then he was going to “turn the art world upside in New York.”

But he stayed because he fell in love with a local girl, Jean Blackstock, and because he fell in love with teaching.

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MORE: To see our photo gallery, point your smartphone camera at the QR code, then tap the link. **NEWSVU**

Johnson

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“Our teachers were role models bigger than life,” said Richardson, who was also in one of Johnson’s classes. “Although the segregated Walker-Grant didn’t have the facilities of other schools, we had all the support we needed in the form of the teachers.”

Richardson said the only C he ever received in a class was from Johnson.

“He knew what my potential was and that I wasn’t living up to it,” Richardson recalled. “He made me a better person because I knew the excellence he expected.”

Throughout the turbulent 1960s, Johnson served as a leader to students advocating for civil rights in Fredericksburg by organizing sit-ins at local lunch counters.

Pamela Bridgewater, a career diplomat who was also Johnson’s student at one time, recalled how he was among the leaders who taught the students about peaceful protest.

“When several people would come to foment unrest, he would be there to quell it,” she said.

Johnson would go on to teach at James Monroe High School and as an adjunct professor of art at Germanna Community College and the University of Mary Washington—becoming UMW’s first Black faculty member in 1968.

In 1977, Johnson was named Virginia Teacher of the Year, the first time an art teacher earned that honor.

He told the Free Lance-Star earlier this year that, “I always have felt good about students, because ... it’s good for them to see somebody who cares about them as an individual, and not how much their family’s income [is], or what a great athlete they are.”

Johnson retired from teaching after 32 years and became a full-time artist. He opened a studio on Charles Street and was a founding member of Art First, the city’s oldest artist co-op.

He was a deacon and Sunday School teacher at Shiloh Baptist Old Site and a lifelong member of the NAACP.



FILE, ROBERT A. MARTIN, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Johnny Johnson talks with Michael Evans, 10, about his art project for the Rappahannock Big Brothers Big Sisters art show at Old Mill Park in Fredericksburg in June 1988.



FILE, PETER CIHELKA, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Fredericksburg artist, educator and humanitarian Johnny P. Johnson is honored during ‘Celebrate Johnny P. Johnson Day’ in Fredericksburg on July 7, 2018.

He was a leader of Fredericksburg’s Council on Human Relations and the Fredericksburg Area Community Relations Organization in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively.

When Bridgewater was serving as ambassador to Benin in the early 2000s, she invited Johnson to come over and conduct art workshops. After the visit, Johnson created the Benin Art Support Project as a way to continue supporting arts education in the west African country.

Bridgewater also invited Johnson to come to Jamaica, where she served as ambassador from 2010 to 2013, for the country’s celebration for the 50th anniversary of its independence from the United Kingdom.

There was an exhibit of two dozen of his paintings at the U.S. Embassy and Johnson visited local schools and senior living facilities and did multiple radio and TV interviews talking about his art and approach to social commentary.

Johnson was generous with his time and his talent, donating thousands of dollars worth of paintings to community orga-

nizations, Richardson said.

In 2018, Fredericksburg city officials declared July 7 “Johnny P. Johnson Day.” There was a packed celebration of his life at Shiloh Old Site and local artist Bill Harris unveiled a mural featuring Johnson at the back of Corky’s on Sophia Street.

When Harris gave Johnson a paintbrush and asked him to add his own touch to the mural, Johnson instead wrote, “Bill is great!”

Greenlaw said she’s glad the community had a chance to honor Johnson while he was still alive.

“So often we don’t honor people while they are with us,” she said.

Adegbalola said that in losing Johnson, “the world has lost a true Christian, a man whose living was Christ-like.”

“We were blessed by having Johnny P. Johnson,” she said. “He was just Christ-like in the way he treated people. He showed us how to live, which is what Christ did. He showed people a way to live.”

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