



HomeschoolNYC Newsletter

Celebrating Child-led Learning

Vol. 1, issue 3 February 2010

Welcome to the third issue of the HomeschoolNYC Newsletter, sharing thoughts and ideas about child-led learning and homeschooling in the Big Apple. February is Black History Month, and Feb. 14th is the anniversary of Frederick Douglass's birth. This issue's suggested field trips celebrate this fact. I hope that you find some useful information here, and perhaps some inspiration too.



Laurie Block Spiegel

In This Issue:

Homeschooling News from Europe

Black History Field Trip Ideas

Suggested Reading

Art History of Ancient Africa

Mapping Your Family History

Quote by Marva Collins

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Homeschooling News from Europe

Perhaps you noticed the news last week about a [German family who fled to the US](#) to seek political asylum because they were homeschooling. In Germany homeschooling is illegal. These parents had been fined and threatened with imprisonment because they continued to homeschool. Last week they were awarded asylum in Tennessee. I have not heard of any other case of political asylum being sought on the basis of homeschooling.

Later I received a [news clipping from Belgium](#), implying that homeschooling there is in serious peril. It seems that even high test scores are not enough to forestall police harassment of homeschoolers in Belgium. The legal paperwork that homeschoolers must sign gives them few rights. If homeschoolers

refuse to sign, police may show up to escort your children to school.

Thank goodness that homeschooling is legal in the US, even if the legal demands vary from state to state. Here in NYC we know that the laws could be better. Yet we are also grateful for the freedoms we have. In my opinion, New York City is truly one of the best places in the world to homeschool your children. One obvious reason is the endless array of [cultural and educational activities](#) that this great city has to offer. Another reason, not so well known, is the incredible [community of homeschooling parents](#) who form groups, plan courses, arrange field trips, create outdoor learning opportunities, get group discounts to children's performances, and seem to always be on hand for help and support. During my lifetime here I have seen this community explode, with new activities and opportunities appearing daily! It's no surprise that many homeschooling families in Europe wish they were doing it here.

February Field Trip Ideas



February is Black History Month. Here are some noteworthy sites to remind us of how far we have come.

As a child, I remember the thrill of discovering a square of diamond-shaped glass panes buried in the sidewalk before 157 Willow St. in Brooklyn Heights, just north of Pierrepont St. A plaque on the house says the window provided light to an underground tunnel that connected #159 to a post-Civil War stables. The houses were built in 1830, and in my child's imagination that tunnel was built to help runaway slaves escape. To me this was proof that parts of the Underground Railroad were indeed underground. It turns out that [Brooklyn](#), with its enormous harbor and active abolitionist movement, was a haven for stowaway slaves who jumped ship. Many city residents have discovered hidden basement rooms with old stoves and iron pots, leading them to believe that their homes were once "[safe havens on the freedom line](#)." Perhaps the center of the anti-slavery movement in NYC, and a major stop on the underground railroad, was [Plymouth Church](#) (on Orange St. between Hicks and Henry), known to some at the time as the Grand Central Depot. Their first preacher, in 1847, was Henry Ward Beecher. Walt Whitman was a fan of Beecher's sermons, as was Abraham Lincoln (you can find the pew where he sat in 1860, marked with a plaque). Other guest speakers included: Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Mark Twain, and Charles Dickens, and (much later) the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Tours are available by appointment, call 718-624-4743. Afterward, if the weather's good, stroll over to the Brooklyn Heights Promenade, a great place to sit and eat lunch. If it's freezing, try the soup at Siggy's Organic Cafe on Henry St. right around the corner from Plymouth Church.

The [African Burial Ground](#) in lower Manhattan was discovered in 1991 during excavation work for a new federal building. Originally located outside the boundaries of New Amsterdam, hundreds of free and enslaved Africans were buried here during the 17th and 18th centuries, in unmarked graves. Today the site is a memorial, with an interpretive center next door at 290 Broadway, open Monday - Sunday 9-5.

[Beyond Swastika and Jim Crow: Jewish Refugee Scholars at Black Colleges](#) is on view at the [Museum of Jewish Heritage](#) through February 21st. This exhibit tells the story of Jewish professors, scientists and scholars who fled the Nazi regime and found refuge in black colleges in the segregated south. The museum

is located in Battery Park, at the southern tip of Manhattan. If the weather is nice, wander behind the museum to view the harbor or have a picnic lunch.

The NY Historical Society, located at W. 77th St. and Central Park West, currently has two exhibits on the Civil War: [Lincoln and New York](#), and [John Brown, the Abolitionist and His Legacy](#), both running through March 25th. You can also peruse their [online collections](#) relating to the Underground Railroad, including an exhibit on slavery in New York called [New York Divided](#).

Perhaps the greatest collection of Black Culture and History in NYC is at the [Schomburg](#) branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem. This month you can see watercolors by a five-time winner of the Caldecott award for children's book illustrations, in an exhibit called [Jerry Pinkney's African-American Journey to Freedom](#). Also on display are photographs of [Barak Obama's first year in office](#).

Columbia University undertook a project to map the African American past in New York City. From 1632 to the present, [MAAP](#) has archived photographs and mapped locations paired with lesson plans. Create your own walking tours, or browse through history from the comfort of your computer.

Suggested Reading

[Henry's Freedom Box, by Ellen Levine.](#)

The true story of a slave who mailed himself to freedom,
recommended for ages 4-8.

[The People Could Fly, by Virginia Hamilton.](#)

African-American Folktales for ages 4 and up.

[Sojourner Truth's Step-Stomp Stride, by Andrea Pinkney,](#)

[illustrated by Brian Pinkney.](#)

[Child of the Civil Rights Movement, by Paula Young Shelton.](#)

A true life account, for ages 4 and up.

[Freedom's Children:](#)

[Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories, by Ellen S. Levine.](#)

Recommended for ages 9-12.

[Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation:
A Three-Dimensional Interactive Book with Photographs and Documents
from the Black Holocaust Exhibit, by Velma Maia Thomas.](#)

A book for teachers and children.

Art History of Ancient Africa



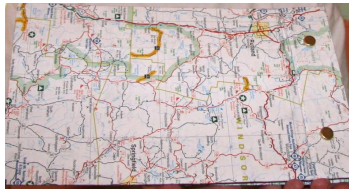
In my art history class on ancient Africa, students first listen to drumming music. I ask them to raise their hands whenever they hear the rhythms change. Listening intently, their hands shoot up again and again. A musician friend made a recording for me of several drumming styles from different regions of Africa. Each has a unique basic rhythm, with varied internal rhythms. Then we examine Kente cloth and weavings, which often look like colorful musical notation. This is



art from a drumming culture. We look at a map of this enormous continent and focus on the west coast cultures. Each child receives white cowrie shells, symbols of purity and wealth, which adorned the garments and crowns of Yoruba kings. We look at images of ceremonial masks. Then, to the sound of drumming rhythms, the students make their own masks. I supply them with cardboard mask templates, tempera paint, feathers, raffia, beads, and shells. Many put a brown or black base color all over the mask before they add their design and decorations.

[See more student work here.](#)

Mapping Your Family History



There are many ways to celebrate your own family's history. We all have stories of past struggles for freedom, which deserve to be expressed in story, song, and illustration. Map your family's story by marking important locations and journeys on a large map. You can add photos or drawings of those places (glued onto the map), or images of relatives when they were the age of their journey. A map like this becomes a book that you can read again and again. Trace the paths of family immigrations, of moving from one home to another, of summer vacations, or just highlight memorable places in NYC or wherever you live. Interview a grandparent about their journeys and how they came here. Write a poem or ballad about an ancestor. Or write a story from the point of view of an object that was carried by a grandparent, or from the point of view of a house where your family lived. Bind your story into a map-covered book, perhaps using an actual road map from your travels for the cover. These activities combine social studies, language arts, geography, math (distance), and art.

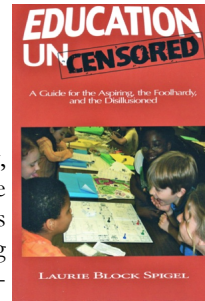
[More map-covered books by students.](#)

Quote by Marva Collins

"The essence of teaching is to make learning contagious, to have one idea spark another."

~ Marva Collins, educator and founder of the Westside Preparatory School

Education Uncensored



Laurie Spiegel is a leading educator in the New York City homeschooling community, teaching popular group classes. Her approach is informal, creative, and child-led. Here she shares her innovative ideas and original techniques for every subject. She explains why our current educational system has it all backwards and shows how exciting learning can truly be. A real source of inspiration as well as a practical guide, this is an eye-opening book for every parent and teacher.

Available now at HomeschoolNYC.com

Price: \$12.95 plus shipping & handling

[Read an excerpt.](#)

E-mail comments and suggestions to Laurie@HomeschoolNYC.com.

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