

Tubman tunes: Auburn elementary school students record songs about famed abolitionist

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AUBURN — Genesee Elementary School student Tyrone Pemberton came up with the refrain for a women's suffrage song while flipping through the pages of a thesaurus.

Pemberton, a sixth-grade student at the Auburn school, was one of the students doing research at the time for a song on women's suffrage from the perspective of iconic abolitionist and former Auburn resident Harriet Tubman. Pemberton's lyrics — "Some have the right/ some have to fight/ for suffrage to receive it," — were sung by him and his fellow students at Auburn Public Theater Thursday. Pemberton's class and Genesee fifth-grade students recorded songs about Harriet Tubman to be used at Auburn's upcoming [Equal Rights Heritage Center](#).

Genesee students have been writing and performing different Tubman tunes for years. The city of Auburn sponsored the professional recording at the theater. City Clerk Chuck Mason said a part of an exhibit at the center will be dedicated to historical songs and the ways in which abolition and suffrage were celebrated in song and speeches. The city asked Genesee school librarian Anne Mlod and retired Genesee teacher Cinda Gilmore to help set up the recordings to go with the theme.

"There's a whole bunch of different speeches and songs that date to the 1800s that will be included in the exhibition, and we wanted there to be some contemporary celebration of these topics, and we thought the Genesee Elementary students were a perfect fit for that," Mason said.

Terry Leonino and her husband and musical partner Greg Artzner, who make up the folk duo Magpie, led students through several rehearsals and the final recording of the suffrage song

Thursday morning. [The duo have crafted various Tubman songs with students](#) over the years.

Mlod and Gilmore held up large cue cards with the lyrics to the song, visibly mouthing the words as the students went along.

Leonino and Artzner would often stop the children with a smile if they weren't all together while singing. Students often released a large collective breath after singing the entire piece. Once the song was recorded for the last time, Leonino put one hand behind her back as she addressed the students.

"Pat yourselves on the back and say, 'I am a recording artist, I am a songwriter and I celebrate Auburn and Harriet Tubman,'" Leonino said as the students mimicked her en masse.

Student Cailyn Cook, 11, said she felt pride knowing that she had a hand in the piece's creation.

"I'm excited that it's going to be in the center," she said.