



# UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FREE PRESS®

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## Ruckers, Pepper and Wells Honored as 2018 Free Press Prize Laureates



Sparky and Rhonda Rucker



John Pepper



Lezlie Harper Wells

Two legendary troubadours, a civic-minded Fortune 500 CEO, and the Canadian founder of an Underground Railroad tour company are the winners of the 2018 Underground Railroad Free Press Prizes for preservation, leadership and advancement of knowledge, respectively. The prizes have been awarded by *Free Press* annually since 2008 to recognize the most outstanding contributions in the international Underground Railroad community in promoting the Underground Railroad, heritage and are regarded as the community's top honors. This year's winners comprise an especially broad array of talents and contributions.

### The 2018 Free Press Prize Preservation

This year's preservation prize is awarded to James "Sparky" Rucker and Rhonda Rucker, the much-awarded husband-and-wife team who have done as much as anyone to revive, perform and thus preserve the music of the Underground Railroad. The couple, who have been performing together for 30 years, also specializes in the music of the Civil Rights Movement.

Sparky Rucker descends from a long line of clergymen and law enforcement officers, and from a great-great-grandmother who was sold at auction and force-marched in shackles from Virginia to Maryville, Tennessee, where the Ruckers make their home today.

That is, when they are there. The Ruckers spend most of their time on the road giving concerts, covering most states and

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### The 2018 Free Press Prize for Leadership

This year's leadership prize goes to John Pepper, former chairman of the board of directors of Cincinnati's National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and retired president Procter & Gamble, for his indispensable role in getting the Freedom Center funded, and up and running.

It is not an exaggeration to say that without Pepper's intervention at a critical juncture this most important of Underground Railroad institutions might never have come into existence.

It was a full eight years from when the concept of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center was first proposed until 2002 when 14,000 people attended the institution's groundbreaking ceremony. During the interim, insufficient financial support had stalled the project until the Center's board brought

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## IN THIS ISSUE



The 2018 Free Press Prizes for leadership, preservation and advancement of knowledge are announced.



A mid-South state with a substantial Underground Railroad history.



A reopened U.S. Underground Railroad route? Yes, complete with fugitives, a safe-house and conductors.

### The 2018 Free Press Hortense Simmons Memorial Prize for the Advancement of Knowledge

This prize is awarded to Lezlie Harper Wells, founder and operator of Niagara Bound Tours of St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada.

Since 2004, Wells has been leading tours of the famous falls and nearby sites associated with the Underground Railroad and African-Canadian history. Says Canadian writer Peter Meyler, "Without Lezlie Wells and Niagara Bound Tours, Niagara's Black historic sites would be just bricks and mortar. With Lezlie, they become the stories of real people whose hopes and dreams were fulfilled. For her, providing freedom-seeker tours is a divine calling and passion. Her personal knowledge of the struggles of African Americans for equality and justice is just the starting point of her tours and presen-

*Please see Wells, page 3, column 3*

## Network to Freedom Announces 2018 Convention

In a new one-day design dispensing with its traditional academic conference format, the National Park Service's Underground Railroad Network to Freedom program will hold a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary convention on October 16 at Boston's African Meeting House.

That morning will feature the premiere screening of *Fighting for Freedom: Lewis Hayden and the Underground Railroad*. In the afternoon, Boston African American National Historic Site staff will conduct a tour of the local Black Heritage Trail for attendees.

The evening dinner program will include a keynote address and book signing by Yale historian and Gilder Lehrman Center director David Blight, whose new biography, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, comes out October

Robert Stanton, former director of the National Park Service, and Gay Vietzke, the Park Service's regional director for the northeast, will also address the conference.

To sign up, visit <https://bit.ly/2MI8wQC>.

# Historic N.Y. Underground Railroad Route Revived for Refugees

We have read lately of modern slavery of sex workers, foreign embassy maids, and sweatshops, but until now nothing of a revival of Underground Railroad operation in the U.S. But as *Washington Post* reporter Tim Craig writes in this firsthand account, the historic Plattsburg-to-Canada route is up and running again, replete with conductors, at least one safehouse and a welcoming Canada. The difference now is that the freedom seekers are not fleeing slavery but ICE. Reprinted with permission. Edited for space.

## Easing the Journey North

By Tim Craig

Omer Malik knew he had to slip into Canada to avoid President Trump's crackdown on undocumented immigrants.

But the 19-year-old native of Afghanistan needed a friend to help guide him. He found that friend in a 66-year-old former French teacher, one of a number of people here in the Adirondack region who believe it's their duty to comfort and support those fleeing Trump's vision for America.

As Malik dragged his suitcase toward the Canadian border, Janet McFetridge gave him two bags of potato chips, a knit hat and — what she considers her most important gift — a hug. Then she yelled across the thicket of cattails and flowering grasses that separated them from Quebec.

"Hello," she called, alerting a Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer that Malik was about to illegally cross the border to claim asylum. "We got someone here."

McFetridge is part of a loosely assembled network of progressive activists, faith leaders and taxi drivers who have mobilized to help [undocumented immigrants cross the northern border](#). To some, they're selfless do-gooders ushering people to better lives. To others, they're perpetuating a problem that has debilitated Canada's immigration system.

For centuries, residents note, towns in the Champlain Valley have been a path to security, serving as an escape route for people fleeing slavery, the Vietnam War draft and Central American wars. Now, when it comes to immigration, this GOP-friendly part of New York has become a hub of the resistance.

"We view this as our Underground Railroad," said Carole Slatkin, an advocate who has helped immigrants traveling through Essex, N.Y., a town that was part



The Roxham Road Underground Railroad route near Plattsburg, New York



The Canadian border at route's end of [a major route for enslaved people](#). "While no one is being flogged, and no one is being sold, there is this sort of modern-day equivalent of feeling like people are in danger."

Janet McFetridge, 66, explains to a family of Palestinian asylum seekers what will happen when they try to cross the border. McFetridge waits at this waypoint year-round, offering snacks, clothes and toys for children on the journey to Canada.

Advocates say they try not to give direct advice to the immigrants, instead helping them find a place to rest or supplies to ease their journey. But the image of U.S. citizens supporting immigrants who make the trip is controversial in Canada, threatening long-standing, cross-border camaraderie.

"To me, it's just being abusive," said Paul Viau, mayor of the township of Hemmingford, a Canadian farming community along the border. "There are people who sympathize with [the immigrants] and people who have a harder time with it. But no one appreciates that someone would pack them up and bring them to the border at an illegal crossing."

Last year, as the Trump administration began enacting stricter policies against undocumented immigrants, Canada processed [more than 50,000 asylum claims](#). That is more than double the claims made in 2016, according to Canadian government statistics.

Many of those immigrants have been crossing at unauthorized locations, such as here on Roxham Road.

Although the flow of asylum seekers into many Canadian provinces has slowed this year, there has been no letup into Quebec. From January through June, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police apprehended 10,261 people crossing the border illegally there. Last year, the police apprehended 18,836 people.

The arrivals have sparked a backlash from segments of Canada's political system. In late June, Toronto Mayor John Tory warned that [the influx of asylum seekers](#) had overwhelmed that city's ability to care for them.

"We have a problem, and we need help," Tory told Canadian reporters in a plea for more emergency housing.

In Quebec, the leader of its nationalist party, Jean-François Lisée, has [suggested](#) constructing a wall along the southern border of the province.

Asylum seekers enter a shelter on the Canadian side of Roxham Road, which starts near Champlain, N.Y. The outpost was built to help process the recent surge of refugees and asylum seekers, which can total about 50 people a day.

Roxham Road, a narrow paved road lined by horse farms and marshes, has served as a path recently for Palestinians, Colombians, Ghanaians, Nigerians, Haitians, Zimbabweans and Pakistanis, among others.

After one taxi pulled up here, Fiyori Mesfin struggled to carry a car seat, stroller and two backpacks as she crossed the border with her two children, ages 1 and 3.

Mesfin, 32, is a single mother from Eritrea who had been living for the past four years in Las Vegas. Her children are U.S. citizens.

After she was recently denied asylum in the United States, Mesfin began to fear she could be deported or even separated from her children. So she flew to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York and then boarded a Greyhound bus for Plattsburgh, N.Y.

"So now I am here just hoping it gets better," Mesfin said as she pushed the stroller, while trying to manage her tod-

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## Ruckers

Canada. Their website, [sparkyandrhone.com](http://sparkyandrhone.com), shows upcoming performances in locales as widespread as Arizona, Wisconsin and Maryland.

Sparky Rucker began his musical career as a child sixty years ago when he took up the guitar and trumpet, and began singing in church, school and community choirs. After graduating from the University of Tennessee, he taught school in Chattanooga before becoming a full-time folksinger. His performing honors include the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and the International Storytelling Festival, NPR's *Prairie Home Companion*, *Mountain Stage*, and *Morning Edition*, the American Folk Blues Tour of Europe, and the National Folk Festival at Wolf Trap.

Growing up in Louisville, Kentucky, Rhonda Rucker began taking piano lessons at age four, and, being raised in the Methodist Church, learned many of its old hymns and gospel songs, and occasionally substituted for the church organist. As a teenager, she taught herself to play guitar.

She attended University of Louisville and completed her medical degree and internal medicine residency at the University of Kentucky. During medical school and residency, she spent many months in the small mountain towns of eastern Kentucky, absorbing the stories she heard from patients, and grew to appreciate the heritage and culture of Southern Appalachia. She later practiced medicine as a board-certified internist for five years in Maryville, Tennessee.

In 1989, Rhonda began performing on stage with Sparky, playing blues harmonica and adding vocal harmonies. She later added piano, clawhammer banjo, and rhythmic bones to her instrumental repertoire. More recently, she has addressed difficult topics like global warming, the broken health care system, and post-traumatic stress disorder by creating powerful songs with melodies rooted in the folk and gospel traditions. Sparky and Rhonda have taken their environmental message across the country, performing at Earth Day celebrations, the Clearwater Festival in New York, national parks, and environmental education centers. Her debut novel, *Swing Low, Sweet Harriet*, was published in October 2013 and favorably reviewed in the November 2013, issue of *Free Press*.

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## Pepper

on John Pepper, at the time CEO of Procter & Gamble, the Cincinnati-based consumer products giant, to take charge of fundraising. More than \$110 million later under Pepper's leadership and nationwide corporate donation solicitation, the Center opened to wide acclaim. Along the way, Pepper helped streamline the Center's operations and retire much of its debt. Many who were close to the fledgling operation at the time credit Pepper with saving the organization from an early demise. The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center today remains the only major national Underground Railroad organization with a physical presence. In every annual *Free Press* survey of the international Underground Railroad community, the Center has been one of only three Underground Railroad organizations with nationwide recognition, the other two being the National Park Service's Network to Freedom program and *Underground Railroad Free Press*.

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center bills itself as a "museum of conscience," education center, convenor of dialogue, and beacon for inclusive freedom around the globe. Located a few steps from the banks of the Ohio River, the great natural barrier that separated the slave and free states, the Center tells the stories of freedom's heroes from Underground Railroad days to contemporary times, and emphasizes the need to abolish modern slavery worldwide. An estimated 27 million people are currently enslaved around the world, *more than at any other time in human history*. As the Center points out, on average it costs \$90 to buy a person today, while in 1850 the cost of a slave was \$35,000 in today's dollars.

Over a forty-year career at Procter & Gamble, John Pepper served in various positions, culminating as CEO and president from 2000 to 2002, then as chairman of the board's Executive until December 2003 when he retired. During his tenure, Procter & Gamble was regularly cited as one of America's "Most Admired Companies" in *Fortune* magazine's annual survey. After retiring from Procter & Gamble, Pepper served for two years as Vice President of finance and administration at Yale University before being named chairman of the Walt Disney Company from 2007 to 2012.

Pepper's civic service is exemplary. He now serves on the board of trustees of

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## Wells

tations. She not only teaches people the stories of individuals escaping enslavement, but her passion and fervor let people feel the stories."

Frederick Douglass descendant Ken Morris Jr. agrees: "History lives in all of us and Lezlie brings this alive through her stories to educators and young people. Her message is inspiring, about overcoming challenge and obstacle, not only for our ancestors but for us. We need to know where we came from in order to keep going forward. Her stories go back with teachers and students to their homes around Canada and the United States."

Wells fell into the tourism profession after a bad automobile accident left her unable to perform her previous job and she used the ensuing gap to ask herself what she really wanted to do. The answer came easily: put her family's rich history to work by sharing it.

Wells's tours cover the broad spectrum of enslavement in America and its impact on society, from the American Revolution, to the War of 1812, to the Niagara Movement and its importance in founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the NAACP. Among tour sites visited are the Colored Cemetery at Fort Erie, the British Methodist Episcopal Church at St. Catharine's associated with Harriet Tubman, Erie Beach where the Niagara Movement began, and the Josiah Henson home.

Wells is the great-great-granddaughter of Jack Bright, a freedom seeker who escaped enslavement in Kentucky and arrived in Canada in 1851 with his brother and nine-year-old sister. Her grandfather, William John Chandler, born in London, Ontario, fought for the Union Army in the U.S. Civil War. Wells grew up across from Buffalo, New York, in the small town of Fort Erie, Ontario, where Jack Bright had settled. Says Wells, "Because I am a descendant, I am also able to talk about contemporary issues affecting Blacks in Canada. It is always my hope that two things occur: that those of colour feel prouder of whom they are, and that those on the tour want to learn more."

Lezlie Wells has been recognized by the province of Ontario with its Superhost honor, and in 2009 was named by Travel Professionals of Color as the organization's Canadian representative. She is also involved in the efforts to restore Harriet Tubman's Church in St. Catharine's, On-

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## Ruckers

Her performing credits include NPR's *On Point*, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., the International Storytelling Center, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, and the National Folk Festivals of Australia and Scotland. She is a contributor to educational media projects of the National Geographic Society, Kentucky Educational Television, and the Eastern National Park and Monument Association.

The couple has recorded nine albums, all available at Amazon.com. Their 1991 release, *Treasures and Tears*, was nominated for the W.C. Handy Award for Best Traditional Recording.

## Revived

...dler, toward Canada.

Saman Modarage also had taken the bus.

Modarage is a Sri Lankan native who fled his country in 2005 during a civil war. He had settled in suburban Washington and worked at a liquor store in Prince George's County.

But Modarage, 51, decided to try to flee Maryland for Canada after he heard that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was raiding and auditing Maryland convenience stores searching for undocumented employees.

In a recent statement, ICE noted that it has opened nearly 6,100 worksite investigations and made more than 1,500 arrests from October through July — more than five times the number of arrests made in the previous fiscal year.

"Donald Trump's administration has pushed me here," said Modarage, who arrived in Plattsburgh with two sets of clothing and \$300. "All immigrants are under threat. ... If I got deported, it would kill me."

The flow of people illegally crossing into Canada from the United States has continued despite an agreement in 2002 between the countries that is designed to manage refugee movements.

The Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement requires migrants to make an asylum claim in the first safe country they reach, unless they are minors or have family ties at their next destination. The agreement means many of those who try to cross from the United States into Canada at an official border station are turned away.

## Pepper

Xavier University, the historically black university in New Orleans. He is a member of the executive committee of the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative, and sits on the boards of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. He served as a fellow of the Yale Corporation from 1995 to 2003, including two years as senior fellow, and as a member of the Advisory Committee of the Yale School of Management.

Now 80, John Pepper continues his long tradition of service to others by serving on the boards of Boston Scientific and Motorola.

But a loophole permits asylum claims to be made by individuals who enter Canada covertly, such as here on Roxham Road, about five miles west of the interstate. Crossing illegally at out-of-the-way sites has become the preferred method for undocumented immigrants in the United States as well as those in the country legally who see their chance of getting asylum or permanent residency dimming.

Many take a bus from New York City to Plattsburgh, where waiting taxis transport them about 30 miles to the end of Roxham Road, a 100-yard dirt path into Canada.

Federal officers stationed on the other side of the border immediately arrest those who cross illegally. But if the crossers have proper identification, no criminal history and are not otherwise considered a security threat, most are released within 72 hours, said Sylvain Thibault, a coordinator at Project Refugee, a Montreal-based humanitarian group.

They then stay in a shelter, or with family or friends, while they await their hearing. They are also eligible for public assistance, health care and an opportunity to apply for a Canadian work permit.

Canadian law dictates asylum hearings should be held within 60 days.

But Paul Clarke, executive director of the Action Refugees Montreal, an advocacy group, said the government is so overwhelmed, it's now taking up to two years for cases to be heard.

Last year, Canadian courts granted asylum in about 60 percent of cases, Clarke said. Canadian authorities have warned  
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## Wells

tario. Known as the Salem Chapel British Methodist Episcopal Church, it is an important stop on her tours. Wells is also a frequent speaker at numerous events and presentations.

Niagara Bound's Underground Railroad Era Tours run on both sides of the border from February to October in the Niagara and Buffalo regions. Single-day tours include a guide and shuttle transportation. Tour goers are encouraged to bring a lunch. Preregistration is required. The tour is best suited to families with youth aged twelve and older. For details, visit [niagaraboundtours.com](http://niagaraboundtours.com).

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## Revived

that far fewer of the most recent arrivals are expected to qualify.

McFetridge, the teacher turned activist, has lived in Champlain about five miles from the border for three decades. But she never paid much attention to it until after Trump's election, when she was looking for ways to convert her agony over his win into meaningful action.

In March 2017, when she began hearing about an influx of immigrants into Canada, she decided to drive up to Roxham Road. The sight of people dragging luggage — and children — down “an isolated, lonely, country road” shook her.

“I was just horrified that people were leaving the United States, where we have this idea of being a beacon of hope, for another country,” she recalled. “At that point, I said, we can do something here, and I can at least give them a kind word, and recognize them as people by saying, ‘I am sorry you feel you have to do this.’”

McFetridge began showing up almost daily.

Last winter, realizing many asylum seekers were arriving without warm clothes, she began handing out coats and gloves.

As the weather warmed, she transitioned her efforts to handing out snacks and toys to the children. McFetridge said she tries to avoid giving direct advice or material support to the refugees to avoid conflict with Canadian immigration authorities. But, she said, it's important for her to be there so people know they are not alone and can cross with a sense of safety.

“I can tell them they are not going to be shot,” she said. “They’ve asked me: ‘Do I have to run? Will the police shoot me?’”

McFetridge, who said she encounters dozens of asylum seekers on some days, keeps a log of those she encounters.

“... Woman arrived by plane. 25 years in the US. Leaving son behind, degree in finance ... Father stayed in taxi, sobbing as family left ... Young adult — said she was bisexual & would be killed if returned to home country ...”

Although McFetridge is the most visible advocate, a broad array of community and faith organizations have also mobilized throughout the Champlain Valley to assist people who pass through.

Omer Malik accepts a hat from Janet

McFetridge, one of the most visible refugee advocates, before continuing to the end of Roxham Road and illegally crossing into Canada. Malik came to the United States from Ghazni, Afghanistan.

One organization that was formed to support refugees, Plattsburgh Cares, prints informational pamphlets about how to safely reach Roxham Road. Amid complaints from Canadian officials, the group stopped distributing the pamphlets this spring. It now relies on “word of mouth” to get information out, said Slatkin, 73, the woman in Essex.

As they continue their efforts, the advocates draw comparisons to the stealth network of abolitionists used to help guide people who escaped to Canada in the 19th century.

Of the estimated 100,000 enslaved people who fled the American South from 1810 to 1850, about 40,000 made it to Canada after being hidden in houses and churches along the way, said Don Papson, president of the North Country Underground Railroad Museum in Keeseville, N.Y.

One of the major routes there ran through Champlain, about two blocks from McFetridge's house, he noted. Today, before asylum seekers arrive on Roxham Road, they must travel down North Star Road, believed to be named after the star that people who escaped slavery used to guide them toward freedom.

Martha Swan, executive director of John Brown Lives, a humanitarian group based in Westport, N.Y., and named after the 19th-century abolitionist, said the region's “inspiring history” is what is causing more people to “summon the courage” to support refugees. She said interest in helping the refugees has grown considerably this summer because of outrage over Trump administration's policy of separating detained undocumented immigrants from their children at the U.S.-Mexico border.

“You don't have to do anything extraordinary, necessarily, but you do have to bear witness and help where you can,” said Swann, who recently helped a Nigerian woman make the trip from Los Angeles to the northern border.

At the First Presbyterian Church in Plattsburgh, the congregation decided to convert a Sunday school room into a temporary shelter for use by asylum seekers who may become stranded.

Stuart Voss, chairman of the church's refugee committee, said the church is reviving a role it played in the late 1980s when thousands of migrants from Central America traveled through Upstate New York to reach Canada. Many spent an extended period of time in Plattsburgh — where they were fed, counseled and housed by local churches — while they waited for Canada to consider their asylum requests.

But Voss, 75, said church members now believe they must be far more discreet in their efforts than they were 30 years ago.

“We decided it wasn't the same situation as in 1986 to 1987 because there was no ICE back then, and it was just Border Patrol,” said Voss, referring to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, which was created in 2003 in wake of 9/11. “Customs used to tell us, ‘Okay, as long as they are staying with you, you can help them out.’”

In a statement, the Canadian police declined to comment on Americans' role in helping the refugees but said it added resources to the border and is confident it can meet the security and humanitarian challenge.

In a separate statement, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency said it is “working to identify trends and patterns” of cross-border movement into Canada.

Here along the border, the taxi drivers say they will continue transporting asylum seekers to the border.

Although the drivers say they got into the business to make money — they charge \$50 to \$75 in fares for a one-way trip from the bus station — they say they now see it as their duty to give advice and to comfort and calm passengers.

“They are scared. ... They will ask me if American Border Patrol is going to be here, and how far they have to walk,” driver Troy Gelwicks said after he recently dropped a Haitian family off at Roxham Road. “I say, ‘You just have to walk 10 steps, and Canadian Border Patrol is very friendly.’”

As she waved goodbye to Malik, McFetridge said she is also banking that Canada's government will continue to be more sympathetic than the Trump administration.

“But you have to be realistic,” McFetridge added. “It's not going to work out for everybody.”