

# Black abolitionist 'brought to life'

By **JACQUELINE WALSH**

Staff writer

**NORTHAMPTON** — Reading about a slave being reunited with her 4-year-old son can be a moving experience.

But for emotional impact, try listening to the wails of Carolyn Evans, who portrayed the early American slave and abolitionist, Sojourner Truth, at the John F. Kennedy Middle School on Friday. "Peter! Peter! Something is wrong with Peter. Peter don't know his own mother. What've they done to ya?" she shrieked. "Been told if he let on I was his mama, that they would beat him!"

Evans, who lives in Harriman, N.Y., portrays other famous black women, such as Harriet Tubman of the Underground Railroad, and some not-so-famous, including Stagecoach Mary and the mother of a black man killed in the 1950s for whistling at a white woman.

She also gave a Sojourner Truth performance on Saturday at the Unitarian-Universalist Society.

The eighth-graders who watched Friday seemed mesmerized. Evans said she hoped they would learn more about Truth, who lived in Florence from 1843 to 1857, by seeing her performance

rather than just reading books.

"I've been told it's like a history book opening up right before them," she said.

Dressed in a black dress with a white apron reaching to her feet, she recalled how, as a young girl, Truth was sold with a flock of sheep to a man, and beaten because he did not think she spoke English.

"He beat me something awful," she said. "He didn't have to beat me. Just show me what I want, and I will do it. When you beat me, you take away my humanity."

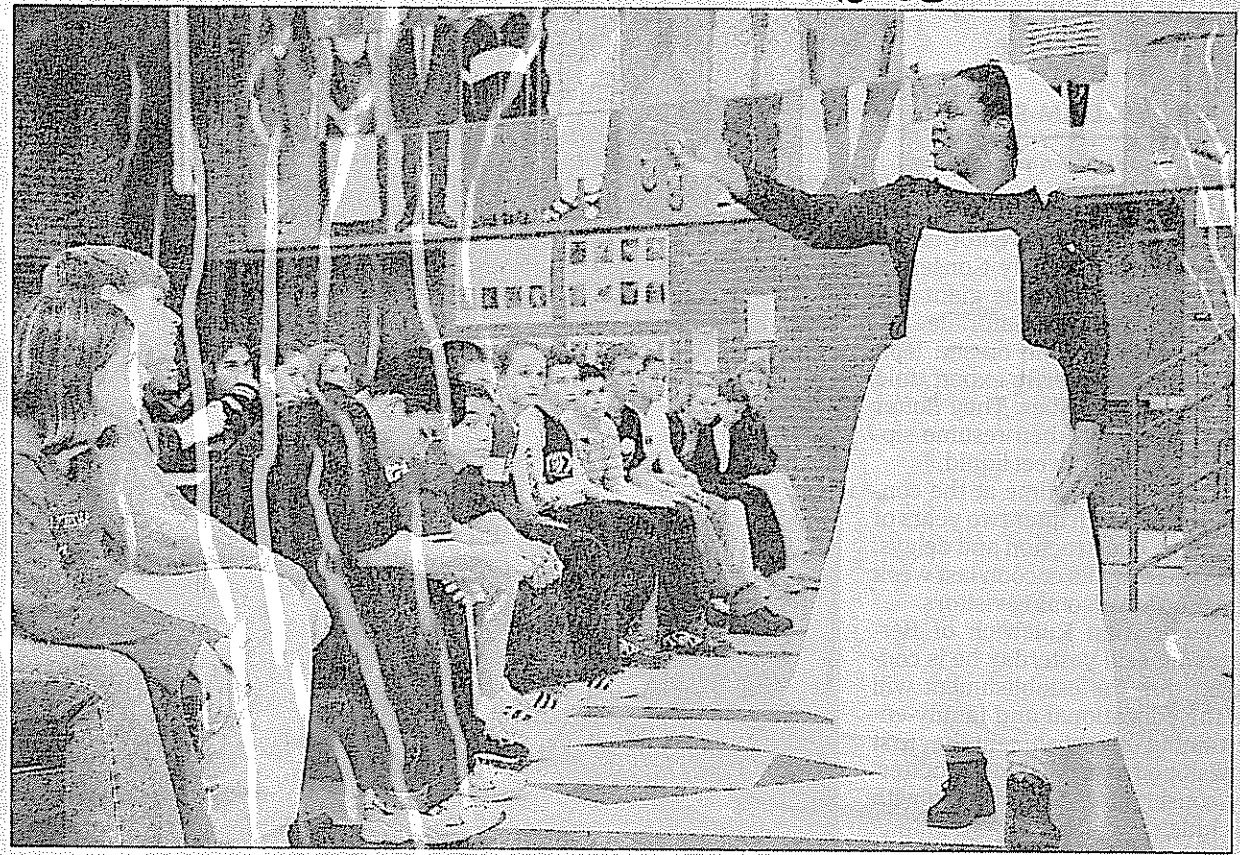
She told the students about Truth's boyfriend, who visited her after his master told him he could no longer see her.

He was beaten and dragged away. Soon after the beating, he died.

Then Truth was told by a master that she would be freed before New York state outlawed slavery in 1827 — if she worked hard.

"That next year, I carried me load, child," she said. "I was like one, maybe two men. Did all the plowing. I took the wool, and I spun it and put it in neat bundles."

But her master went back on his word, telling her that she was making up for poor work she did after giving birth and when she had an injury.



**Actress Carolyn Evans of Harriman, N.Y., portrays the early abolitionist Sojourner Truth, once a slave and later a resident of the Florence section of Northampton, for students at the John F. Kennedy Middle School in Northampton.**

Photo by **MATTHEW CAVANAUGH**

"I gathered me Sophie, and I packed my bags and I walked," she said. "I walked right off that plantation."

Later, a member of the Society of Friends (Quakers) paid for her, and she was free.

"He said, 'You're free. Free to go. Free to be whatever you want

to be,'" she said.

She then went to court to get her 4-year-old son back. He had been sold to a slaveholder in oppressive Alabama. When she got him back, he bore scars from beatings.

"Someone had beat him," she said. "Beat a baby? You're not supposed to beat a baby. The same

man who beat my child beat his wife to death. She was only 25."

Evans told the students that Truth was happy in Florence, where she lived in a communal society.

"She said this was the freest place she had ever been," said Evans.