

NEW BEDFORD



Carl Cruz welcomes the audience to the 16th annual Frederick Douglass community read-athon Sunday at the First Unitarian Church in New Bedford. PHOTOS BY DAVID W. OLIVEIRA/STANDARD-TIMES SPECIAL/SCMG

# Readers share Douglass' journey

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NEW BEDFORD — At the end of his landmark autobiography, "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave written by Himself (1845)," Douglass writes that he is "sincerely and earnestly hoping this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system."

That "little book" made a big impact. One hundred seventy one years later, his words still resonate, including in the city where he lived for three years.

The story that helped end slavery was read in its entirety Sunday at the 16th annual Frederick Douglass community read-athon held at the First Unitarian Church.

Government officials, middle school students and members of the general public read the book, each taking a chapter or part of one. The book relates Douglass' harrowing experiences as a slave and his escape to freedom in

New Bedford.

His first job in the city was working for the minister of the then new church, making it a fitting location for the read-athon, said Carl J. Cruz, chairman of the Frederick Douglass community read-athon.

The readings included starkly written passages of slaves brutally killed for such offenses as ignoring the cries of a baby under their care. In that case, a young girl of 15 or 16 was beaten with an oak stick, breaking her nose and breastbone and causing her death.

Douglass writes that the killing did produce "sensation" but "not enough to bring the murderess to punishment."

In later chapters, Douglass shared his journey to New Bedford, where he would become one of the city's best-known and most-honored residents.

He writes of the three years in New Bedford, where he sawed wood, shoveled coal, swept chimneys and rolled oil



Readers follow along during the read-athon Sunday.

casks. "There was no work too hard, none too dirty," he writes.

But while in New Bedford, he embarked on the calling that made him world famous. While attending an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, he spoke of his experiences as a slave. He was encouraged by William Coffin, who heard him speak in New Bedford and encouraged him to bring his message to Nantucket.

"I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down," he writes.

But he continued to speak and write more books, including the one read Sunday, and his words helped change history.

Douglass has no known family in New Bedford, Cruz said, but he hopes to invite his family living in the Washington, D.C. area to the 20th annual event in four years.

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