

Oral History - Interview of Kenneth B. Morris Jr.



In today's post, [Christopher Shell](#), PhD Student in History at Michigan State University, interviews [Kenneth B. Morris](#), the great-great-great grandson of Frederick Douglass and the great-great-grandson of Booker T. Washington. His mother, Nettie Washington Douglass, is the daughter of Nettie Hancock Washington (granddaughter of Booker T. Washington), and Dr. Frederick Douglass III (great-grandson of Frederick Douglass). Mr. Morris continues his family's legacy of anti-slavery and educational work as co-founder and president of the Atlanta-based nonprofit [Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives](#) ([@DouglassFamily](#)).

Kenneth B. Morris, Jr. (Photo by Steven James Collins).

The organization brings the guidance of history to the fight against modern forms of slavery. As part of the present-day abolitionist movement. Current FDFI projects include the [One Million Abolitionists project](#), which aims to distribute one million copies of a special Bicentennial edition of Frederick Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, to young people across the country. **Follow him on Twitter @kmoorrisjr.**



Debra DuHart-Ball, Lead Coach & Dian Roberts and Arlene Warner from our Newark Chapter, had the opportunity to meet Kenneth B. Morris Jr. on January 14th at the Newark Main Library.

Christopher Shell: You are the descendant of two very prominent socio-politically active figures in African American history. How have their accomplishments shaped your life's purpose?

Kenneth B. Morris, Jr.: I've always known that I descended from [Frederick Douglass](#) and [Booker T. Washington](#), but I never embraced it when I was younger. I spent my summers at our family beach house at Highland Beach, Maryland. The house was built for Frederick by his youngest son, Charles (my great-great-grandfather), as a retirement home. It was there, on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, where Frederick dreamed of spending the last years of his life, sitting in "the tower" at the top of his home, looking back to where he had been born into [slavery](#) on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Unfortunately, he passed away a few months before the house was completed.

"We're living at a time when we need the glorious light of truth, people who are willing to stand when others say, 'sit down.' We need people committed to equality who will speak when others say 'be quiet.'" ~ Bryan Stevenson Founder, Equal Justice Initiative

There were photographs of Douglass and Washington throughout the home. I was probably 5 years old when I started to observe their images printed on money and postage stamps. There were schools and libraries named for them. It seemed that everywhere I turned I could feel their presence. The role of heir to a legacy is never chosen and it is more often a

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burden than a blessing, no matter how bright or talented those heirs may be. For the descendants of men like Douglass and Washington, who cast as great a shadow as any American ever has, the expectations can be all the more daunting. As a result, I spent the first part of my life decisively disengaged from my family lineage until providence called. In 2005, I read a *National Geographic* magazine cover story about human trafficking and my world changed dramatically. I had found a new purpose in my life.

Shell: Can you tell us some more about the Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives? What inspired you to co-found the initiative?

Morris: As I mentioned previously, I read a *National Geographic* magazine cover story entitled "21st Century Slaves." When I read and absorbed this, I realized the Douglass and Washington legacies were part of a calling for me – a calling to leverage history in order to help change the future for those held in modern-day slavery. The life I had been living all of those years ended abruptly, and, like Frederick Douglass, I too became an abolitionist. Call it fate or fortune, destiny or DNA, I had been chosen by this path.

There are millions of people around the world who are bought and sold for sex and other forms of forced labor today: young girls and boys enslaved in brothels; children forced to work because their hands are small enough to do close needlework or pull fish from nets; men and women forced to farm, mine, or work in factories or service industries in dangerous conditions. Many make the clothes and harvest the food that we consume at low prices every day.

Frederick Douglass identified the key to ending this human scourge when he realized at the tender age of nine that, "Education makes a man unfit to be a slave." My ancestor understood that knowledge was power and it would one day be his key to freedom. Unless we can educate people about slavery's past and present, and about the methods that human traffickers use to entrap and exploit, it will continue unabated.

The magazine article inspired me to collaborate with my mother, [Nettie Washington Douglass](#), and a business partner, [Robert Benz](#), to start [Frederick Douglass Family Initiatives](#) (FDI). Our mission is to advance freedom through knowledge and strategic action by fighting modern forms of slavery through prevention [education](#) curricula and educator training in K-12 schools.

Shell: In addition to fighting against modern forms of slavery are there any other issues domestic or international, that the FDI tackles or plans to tackle in the near future?

Morris: One of the initiatives we launched when we started the organization was a project called *History, Human Rights, and the Power of One*. We deliberately used the words "Human Rights" and not "Human Trafficking" because we knew we would eventually model Frederick Douglass's lifelong commitment to fighting for human rights for all people. In addition to our human trafficking initiatives, we create legacy projects to teach about our ancestors' contributions and work. Our current project is called *One Million Abolitionists*. In recognition of the bicentennial celebration of Douglass's birth, we have published a [special bicentennial edition of Frederick Douglass's Narrative](#), which was his first autobiography published in 1845.

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We are working to giveaway one million copies of this hardcover book to young people everywhere over the next few years. We want to inspire the next generation of leaders with my ancestor's words to make them believe they can do and be anything possible.

We asked [Bryan Stevenson](#), the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, to write an introduction that would help young readers to see and use Douglass to face and transcend the great racial issues of our time. Bryan writes powerfully about the challenges Douglass faced attempting to dismantle the legal institution of slavery in the 19th century. We think we face problems today. Imagine living at a time when your federal government says it is legal to own you and illegal to teach you. I think most people would turn away believing these challenges were too great to overcome. Thankfully, Douglass and the abolitionists did not, or we would be a very different country today. We are very proud of [our edition of the Narrative](#) and I hope everyone reading this interview will purchase a copy or two to support the project. Other FDFI projects include the [Douglass Ireland Project](#); the [Protect human trafficking education program](#); [The FD200 with American University](#); and the [FD Service Learning curriculum](#) to support the book project.

Shell: This year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Frederick Douglass. What advice do you think your ancestor would give us today?

Morris: Near the end of the Great Abolitionist's life, a young boy approached him in the street and asked what advice he would give to a young man interested in joining the fight against [injustice](#). According to the story, Douglass responded, "Agitate, agitate, agitate." This statement captures his life's work. He spoke truth to power. He railed against the hypocrisy of the [slaveholding Christian power](#) for promoting ideals of freedom, liberty, and equality while enslaving human beings on its blood drenched soil. He pressed Abraham Lincoln to do better and to move quicker toward the abolition of slavery. He was always agitating.

It is impossible to know what Frederick Douglass would give us if he were here today. Since his blood flows through my veins, I will take some liberty and attempt to answer the question. I believe he would be pleased to see that progress has been made; however, he would no doubt recognize that there is still a lot more work to do. When we consider the current political climate, the divisive rhetoric being spewed by so-called leaders, and the systemic [racism](#) that rages relentlessly, I am sure my great ancestor would offer the same sage advice for effecting change today: "Agitate, agitate, agitate!"

In Bryan Stevenson's [introduction to our book](#) he writes: "We're living at a time when we need the glorious light of truth, people who are willing to stand when others say, 'sit down.' We need people committed to equality who will speak when others say 'be quiet.' It can be difficult to know how to face some of these overwhelming challenges. Let the words and life of Frederick Douglass show you the way."

My great-great-great-grandfather's legacy reminds us all of our duty to uphold the inalienable rights of all members of the human family. The fight for liberation and equality was his fight. Let's make it our fight too.