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Northumbria helps to place civil rights in the spotlight

Northumbria academics and students are contributing to a new national travelling exhibition celebrating US and UK civil rights.

Historians from Northumbria's American Studies and History programmes have joined forces with Journey to Justice (JtoJ) – a voluntary educational organisation – to participate in exhibitions and events taking place in Newcastle next month. Northumbria students and academics have provided historical expertise to JtoJ's multi-media travelling exhibition which will be piloted in the city before moving on to London, Sheffield and other venues

around the UK over the next few years.

Running from April 4 to May 4, Journey to Justice: Footsteps to Freedom in the North East highlights the less well-known men, women and children involved in the US civil rights movement and takes place at a time when recent Hollywood film, Selma, which focuses on Dr Martin Luther King and a momentous turning point in the African-American freedom struggle, has received critical acclaim and an Oscar nomination. The programme also celebrates the US movement's connections to historic struggles for social justice on Tyneside.

The month-long series will be launched at Newcastle's Discovery Museum at 1.30pm on Saturday 4 April, the anniversary of Dr King's assassination. It will be formally opened by Marcia Saunders who was a volunteer who supported African Americans in Tennessee to register their vote. Former ANC activist and freedom fighter Archie Sibeko will be a guest speaker and the launch will also feature music, history, poetry, film and presentations of projects for local, national and international social change.

Northumbria University is a senior partner institution in the North East working with JtoJ on the exhibition. Brian Ward, Professor in American Studies, has lent his skills as a history consultant, supported by seven Northumbria students who are working on the project as part of the innovative Your Graduate Future module which is now mandatory for American Studies and History undergraduates. Participation in the module helps students to gain valuable work place experience while also exploiting their academic training for real world benefits and impact.

Professor Ward discovered previously forgotten footage of Dr Martin Luther King receiving an honorary degree in Newcastle that featured on BBC's The One Show and in A King's Speech – a documentary narrated by Lenny Henry. This month A King's Speech was awarded the Royal Television Society's award for best factual programme of 2014. Professor Ward will join BBC producer Murphy Cobbing to discuss Martin Luther King's historic 1967 visit to Newcastle and its legacy when the footage is screened on April 24 at the Great North Museum as part of the exhibition series.

Fellow Northumbria academic, Dr Joe Street, senior lecturer in American History, will also deliver a lecture on how theatre was used as a voice for social protest.

Professor Ward said: “With our tremendous strength in American Studies at Northumbria, it’s great that we have been able to play such a conspicuous role in bringing Journey to Justice to Newcastle. Hopefully, the exhibition will remind people of the region’s historical links to the African American freedom struggle, while also celebrating inspirational local campaigns for social justice.”

JtoJ, created by director Carrie Supple, is a national, volunteer-led organisation that aims to inspire people, through learning from past and present human rights struggles to take action for social justice. Partners include Northumbria and Newcastle universities, Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (TWAM), youth and community groups, trade unions, students, and artists.

Carrie said: “Professor Ward and his colleagues and students at Northumbria have been tremendous partners for Journey to Justice in this, our pilot programme. The University has given us expertise, time and resources which have boosted our offer and reach.”

Northumbria’s American Studies programme is also hosting its own “Shadow of Selma” initiative with a major international conference marking the 50th anniversary of the Selma protests and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The conference runs on April 8 and 9 and culminates with a public lecture by celebrated journalist and author Gary Younge at The Sage, Gateshead. Younge’s lecture will also launch the 60th Anniversary Conference of the British Association for American Studies, which is coming to Northumbria for the first time.

Northumbria’s American Studies programme was launched in 2013 and has already become internationally recognised as a leading centre for research and teaching on US history, culture, literature and politics.

For more information about Journey to Justice: Footsteps to Freedom in the North East, visit www.journeytojustice.org.uk.

To find out more about American Studies at Northumbria, visit <http://northumbria.ac.uk/americanstudies>.

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