



Bloomington historian Liz Mitchell at the entrance to a slave site in Ghana.

## Historian Liz Mitchell ‘Returns’ to Africa to Honor Her Ancestors

By Craig Coley

Photography by Proster Kwanson

Liz Mitchell is a people’s historian, telling stories of overlooked African Americans through radio programs, stage dramas, videos, school talks, and public lectures. A retired postal clerk without formal training in history, Mitchell was honored last year with the Indiana Historical Society’s Hubert Hawkins Local History Award for distinguished service in recording local history. She has accumulated the largest private collection of African American memorabilia in Monroe County, is active in historic preservation, and debuted her first documentary film in February.

Her flair for getting history in front of the public is something that James H. Madison, emeritus professor in the Indiana University Department of History, admires about Mitchell. “Liz not only has an enthusiasm for history but also an inner sense of the nature and value of history, and a superb ability to communicate to public audiences,” Madison says.

Mitchell fulfilled a 40-year dream, travelling with her husband, James (Jim) C. Mitchell Jr., to Africa in November, visiting the places her ancestors last saw before being sold into slavery.

The couple toured fortresses where captured Africans were held before boarding

slave ships to the Americas. In Ghana, she was overwhelmed by how she and her husband were greeted by Ghanaians. They didn’t just say “welcome,” Mitchell recounts. “They said, ‘Welcome home.’ I never felt more welcomed and more loved in my life.

“Sometimes I get the feeling that white America would rather we not be here [in America]. For us to live in a country that we love, and that our men and women have fought and died for, and then that country not love us back. ... That’s painful,” she says.

It was a painful experience that ignited Mitchell’s passion for African American heritage. She grew up in Indianapolis, the daughter of a homicide detective who arranged a job for her as a clerk in the Indianapolis Police Department. One day at work, a white man came in to get a copy of a report and said he didn’t want her to get it for him because she was black. “He said, ‘Your people didn’t do anything, and you’re here reaping the benefits of white Americans,’” Mitchell says.

It wasn’t her first encounter with racism, but it forced her to confront what her grandfather had told her: Racism is based on ignorance. She realized that day that the ignorance was her own, as well. “I couldn’t answer this man because I didn’t know,”

Mitchell says. “So I told myself that I would go about finding what minorities had done for this country.”

She began collecting stories, always favoring local history—things that happened right around here. Stories of runaway slaves. Of the people who hid them. Of people who caught them and sold them. Stories of extraordinary talents like Marshall “Major” Taylor, a world record-setting bicyclist from Indianapolis. Stories of people who achieved significant things—people like Carrie Parker, the first black woman to attend Indiana University, and John Morton-Finney, an Indianapolis schoolteacher and principal with 11 college degrees who practiced law until he was 106.



**“You’re one of the children, but you’re left out.”**

Stories of people who experienced unthinkable tragedy, like Vertus Hardiman, who was 5 years old when he and nine other black children from Lyles Station, Indiana, were subjected to test levels of radiation that left Hardiman with a hole in his head and the others with cancer.

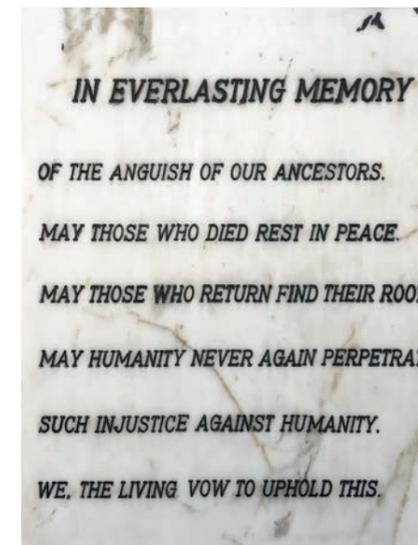
“There is so much out there that has

never been told,” Mitchell says. She likens history books to photo albums of the American family, but with no pictures of black people. “You’re one of the children, but you’re left out,” she says.

In 1979, Mitchell moved to Bloomington with husband Jim, a state trooper who later became Bloomington’s third black police officer. In her free time, Mitchell continued to fill files with information. She began traveling to historic sites, and on a trip south started collecting Jim Crow memorabilia, like the signs that had designated bus seats or building entrances as “for colored patrons

only.” She brings these to school classrooms when she gives presentations.

Before traveling to Africa, Mitchell did her research, and braced herself for the strong emotions she knew she would feel when she visited the slave fortresses of Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. She knew it would be especially tough visiting Elmina’s Door of No Return. This is a narrow opening in a stone wall through which slaves left the fortress to board ships for the Americas. But she says the most moving experience was at a place that had not come up in her research: the Last Bath. This is a spot in a river—a



(opposite page) Elmina Castle.

(clockwise from left) Mitchell at the entrance to the female slave dungeons; the Door of No Return; a plaque at the fortress.

quiet shrine today—where captives who had traveled long distances were told to wash themselves so they would be more attractive when they arrived at the slave fortress. At the site, Mitchell wanted to capture her feelings, and she recorded this into her cell phone:

“I remove one shoe at a time. As I’m bending down to accomplish this chore, sweat trickles down my face and commingles with tears falling from my eyes. Some tears continue the journey down to my neck, and others drip to the sand where my ancestors once stood.

“I’m not sure what’s ahead of me. All I know is that this was 40 years in the making. I’ve been wanting to come since I was 25 years old. I figured that some Ghanaians would call me sister, but I have arrived at the age where they call me mother.

“My guide takes my hand as if he is my son and, barefoot together, we

## LIZ MITCHELL

2008

Mitchell teams with actress and writer Gladys DeVane to perform in the show *One More River to Cross: From Slavery to Jim Crow to Civil Rights*.

AUG. 2013

Mitchell helps launch *Bring It On!*, a weekly radio program on WFHB that explores issues impacting the African American community.

2016

DeVane, Mitchell, and dramaturge Danielle Bruce form Resilience Productions to create the play *Resilience: Indiana’s Untold Story* and bring it to the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center stage in honor of the Indiana bicentennial.

2018

Resilience Productions produces the play *Resilience: Stories of Monroe* for the Monroe County bicentennial, performed at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington.

2018

Resilience Productions performs a play at Pendleton Correctional Facility in Madison County, Indiana. Inmates collect \$608.34 to entice them back.

FEB. 2019

Mitchell debuts her documentary film *Reverend Marvin Chandler: Open to the Moment* at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater and on WTU.

## Projects & Productions



walk so many yards to the Last Bath. It is explained to me what took place at this location, and how we must say a prayer for those who went before us. I feel like doing an ugly cry, and I force myself not to, thinking this would be disrespectful to my ancestors, that I have to be strong for them.

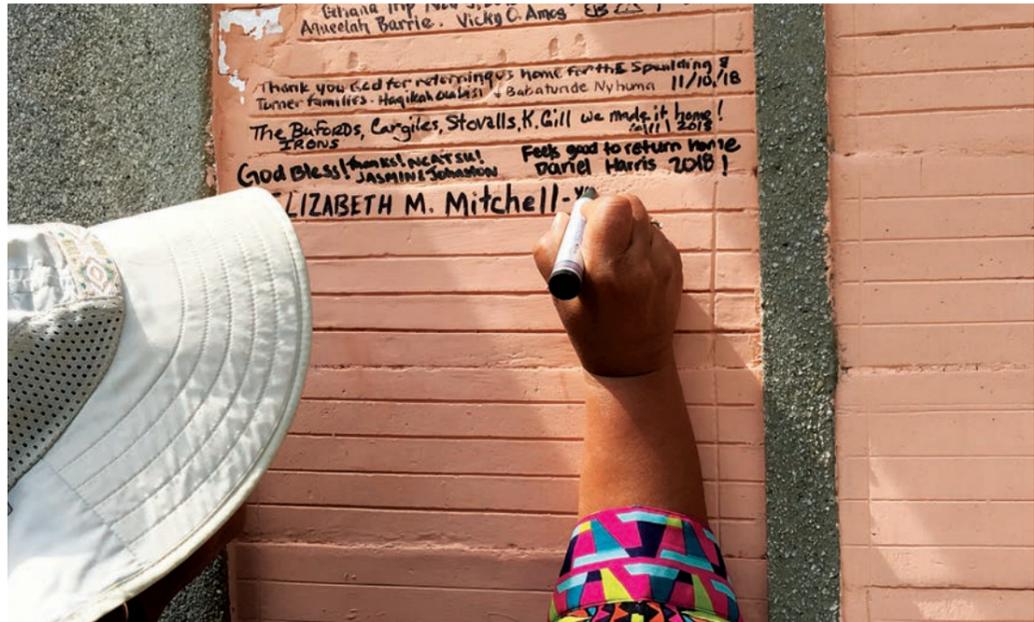
“The guide, the young man who’s now my son, asks that we take a moment of silence,

**“ I feel all sorts of emotions. Tears are streaming down my face, co-mingling with the sweat ...”**

and in my moment of silence I pray that my ancestors are proud of me, that I have not failed them in my actions as a human being. I also pray that they’ve found peace, and their souls are at rest.

“After the moment of silence, the young guide leads me down some stairs—slowly because they are uneven—and we get to the river. He says, ‘Mother, I have a gift for you. Look, see, and behold.’ I look down at my feet, which are now in the water, and the sun is reflecting off flecks of gold. He says no mining was allowed there because it’s a sacred place.

“I follow the rituals as he instructs me, by washing my feet and washing my hands



and washing my face, there where my ancestors took their last bath. I feel all sorts of emotions. Tears are still streaming down my face, co-mingling with the sweat. By now I don’t care who sees me cry, but I am not going to do that ugly cry. It is a powerful moment. I just think I could sit right down and not move ever again.

“I walk slowly back up with the guide holding me gently, up the steps that are uneven, and we walk the few yards back up the path. And we reach the wall of commemoration. He asks if I want to sign it. Of course, I’m going to sign it. I want my ancestors to know that their daughter has returned.” ✨

(top, l-r) Mitchell at the Last Bath with her guide, Proster Kwanson.

(above) Mitchell leaving a message at the wall of commemoration.



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