“My Freedom is a Privilege” —Venture Smith

Venture Smith/Broteer Furro, dubbed “the black Paul Bunyan”, may be more than two centuries old, but he’s still a great role model. A Middletown vo-ag teacher brings him into classrooms as a role model for today.

Peg Van Patten

Andrew O’Brien, a teacher at the Middletown High School Regional Vocational Agriculture School, has developed a character-building curriculum for students based on Venture Smith’s life. Called “My Freedom is a Privilege: Lessons from Venture Smith”. The curriculum, used in agriculture classes, represents Smith as a true American hero and role model. In overcoming the worst adversity by working hard, using his wits, and being honest, loyal, and thrifty, he accomplished amazing feats in his lifetime. Students learn that useful behaviors for dealing with adversity include:

* Be Aggressive
* Be Constructive
* Be Creative
* Be Motivated
* Be Persistent

As a very young boy, Venture (then Broteer Furro) saw his father murdered and his mother and brother horribly mistreated, even as he suffered. There was also an earlier time when his mother and father were not getting along well, and separated. Despite these traumatic experiences, not to mention being enslaved and overburdened, Venture focused on his goal (freedom) with an intensity and persistence that are awe-inspiring. Time and time again bad luck and broken promises thwarted his success. But he never gave up, and eventually succeeded in reaching his dream: he was finally not only a free man but a property owner, farmer and fishing captain with many vessels in his fleet. Anyone who feels like giving up when their dreams are crushed, clam farmer or otherwise, should take a lesson from Venture Smith’s story.

O’Brien’s class understands hard work. Students actually chopped a cord of wood, to understand what it means when they read that Venture chopped 16 cords of wood in one day in order to earn money towards his goal.

Mr. O’Brien’s curriculum, developed as part of the Mattabeset Future Farmers of America Leadership & Diversity Committee Project 2005, won the Connecticut FFA’s H. O. Sargent Award in 2005. The purpose of this award is to recognize success in achieving and promoting diversity in agricultural education.

Mr. O’Brien may expand the curriculum this summer.