

REALIZATION OF A DREAM:
THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSEUM, TACOMA

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this month, said in his famous speech in Washington, DC, August 28, 1963, "I have a dream." Many people have dreams, but nothing comes of them. But in June 1993, under the sponsorship of Koinonia Ministries, Rev. Alred Davis, Sr. talked to Ms. Jackie O'Bannon about a dream. Jackie had recently finished degrees at Seattle University and the University of Washington Tacoma. Jackie, who was a long-time community activist, knew the importance of developing African-American history. She pulled together a small group to explore the idea of a museum. In October 1993, Rev. Davis, Rev. Richard Penton, Ivy Murphy, Elliott Slaughter and Charlotte Caffee became the first African-American Museum Board. They appointed Jackie as their president. Their mission was to "educate the public about the contributions made by African Americans, locally as well as nationally." The mission statement has been changed to say: "to collect, preserve, interpret and exhibit objects and information illustrative of the story of African Americans, for the education and betterment of the community and its visitors."

The African American Museum Board created their first exhibit, "Washington State's First African American Pioneers," which is a collection of twelve (12) 4 by 3 feet colored portraits. It also includes artifacts from that era, such as an 1886 college diploma. The histories of these pioneers and their cities are also included. One of the portraits is of George Washington, founder of Centralia, 1872. This exhibit was shown in several places in Tacoma and Olympia.

Since this first exhibit in 1994, many things have taken place. The Board was restructured several times, adding new members and losing old members; we received our Internal Revenue Service 501(c)3 nonprofit charitable, educational status; and we created more exhibits.

On June 29, 1994, the African American Museum Board opened its Gallery of African American Heritage on the third floor of the old Washington State Historical Museum on Stadium Way. An official opening was held in August 1994, with Tacoma's first African American Mayor Harold Moss and African American State Senator Rosa Franklin among the speakers.

On Veterans' Day 1994, our second exhibit opened in our Gallery entitled, "SERVICE WITH HONOR: The Role of the African American in the Military." This exhibit now includes over 300 pictures of Washington's veterans. It traces the role of African Americans in the military from the Revolutionary War up to the recent Somalia deployment. It includes medals, uniforms and military gear from as early as World War 1 and contains portraits of the Buffalo Soldiers and Tuskegee Airmen.

In March 1995, we opened a third exhibit entitled, "EXTRAORDINARY LEADERS: The African American Mayors of Washington State." This exhibit contains the pictures, personal items and histories of the six African American Mayors of