

African American

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Business & Employment Journal

Where Business & Employment Comes first

Published the 1st and 3rd Thursdays of every month

(206) 322-6117 Fax (206) 322-6245

December 1995

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Published By James Communications

African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center

10 Year Struggle To Build Museum Finally Near End

On a cold winter night in November 1985, six community activist entered a boarded up Colman Elementary School and began the ten year struggle to get control of the building and turn it into the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center.

The six community organizers, Earl Debnam, Charlie James, Omari Tahir, Michael Greenwood, Lawrence Robinson and Greg Anderson are still supporting the Museum. Four are actively working with the project and now serve as Board officers.

The City of Seattle, the Seattle Public School System and the State Department of Transportation have all conceded that the Colman School is now officially designated as the Museum site and now the former adversaries are working together to

"The grant will enable us to put the windows in, paint the window sills, fix the roof and gutters and do some limited landscaping. These improvements will pave the way for the next level of fund raising. The Board's Fund Raising commitment is to raise \$300,000 and this will demonstrate the resolve of our community to build this project."

Debnam, James and other Board members believe the Museum will be constructed floor by floor as money is available. "We hope to have the Museum open for some limited use, and gradually open it up for use as our construction schedule accelerates."

Greenwood said, "We need all the members we can get. If we can get people to come and check us out I feel that they will be more than willing to support us by taking out a \$20 membership fee. Let it be all for one and one for all, and let's build a black establishment...for ourselves."

"The Board currently has been expanded to it's limit of 33 members, said Debnam," we have youth, community activist, professionals and executives. We have people who can get the job done."

Denise Hunt, Senior Advisor to Mayor Norman B. Rice has been instrumental in keeping the city actively involved and has been a key in ushering the project through countless political hurdles.

Pat Chandler, who has taken the assignment as the overall staff coordinator is also optimistic about the project. "We have had some good community events over the last three to four months. They have really raised the level of community awareness about this project."

She, like others, see the project as a community effort and not just a project of a small group of people. "This project started out as the vision of a few" said Chandler, "but it has always embodied the hopes and dreams of the entire African American community all over the state.. Everyone is pulling for this project and we just have to make sure we continue that and give people a reason to be involved."



Attorney William Garling, of the State's Attorney General's office, works his way up front for a slice of Pizza served by ex-state Representative Michael Ross at the Central Area Bite held the last weekend in August. The Pizza Booth (Donated by Piccora's Pizza) raised nearly \$1,000.00 for the African American Museum and Cultural Center.

The Museum is estimated to cost between 10-12million dollars. It would include, a first rate performing Arts theater built from the ground up, T.V. and film production studios and classes on everything from making vases to building computers.

The plans are contingent on the Board's ability to raise capital from private and public sources. "I believe that this project could be one of the greatest single tourist draws in the city when you put the

Museum and MLK Memorial, which is a few blocks a way, together. We are looking at having an Athletic Hall of Fame and getting the Professional athletes involved. Design special displays for Tacoma, Spokane, Tri-Cities and Yakima and get the municipalities and communities involved in fund raising. We need to consolidate our effort rather than building separate museums. We are trying to get Microsoft and Paul Allen to donate money for the film and computer labs. I believe 12 million dollars is reasonable and obtainable, based on what it could mean to the city and the state of Washington," said James.

On the 10th anniversary of the occupation of Colman School the Museum Board held a candle light vigil on November 29th and an award Ceremony in the New Colman School on November 30th. President of the Board, Earl Debnam gave out 40 awards to Board members as well as community leaders like, Mayor Norm Rice, Eddie Rye Jr, and ex School Board President Michael Preston.

Debnam, James and Greenwood both encourage the community to get involved and become a member of one of the standing and operational committees, from Fund Raising to membership. Call James at 322-6117 for further information.

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"We knew that this would be a hard thing to do," explained Debnam. "Whenever your vision exceeds the norm it takes a while before people catch up with what you are trying to accomplish. That's why I believe that the original six brothers that went in the building were more visionary than activist. We are in the process of solidifying a \$65,000 Community Matching Grant and we can begin making the vision a reality."

The building's condition has declined over the last ten years as the effort to secure it and raise money has slowly but steadily crept alone. Many people in the community now consider the building as eyesore but that perception explained, Fund Raising Chair Charlie James, will be an old perception.

**African American Buying Power
Part IV will be in next edition**

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