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A Conversation With Earl Debnam

By Ruqayyah Sabir

"The task is enormous but certainly not impossible, given the distance that we have already traveled." Taken from a report compiled by the Mayor's Task force that merged into the African American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center committee, in February of 1994, these words are truly an accurate description of the essence of the conversation I had with Earl Debnam.

Mr. Debnam took me on a journey filled with commitment, paved with passion and lined with total sacrifice. The journey is yet to be completed but the distance, measured in miles, would certainly span the globe several times by now.

The Museum is and was, since its inception, Mr. Debnam's mission in life, so much so, that many aspects of his existence have taken a back seat to his dedicated efforts. I was taken on a tour through history as Mr. Debnam eloquently and graciously exposed to me his, "gift" to this effort. Terms such as, hard work, struggle and sacrifice, somehow do not adequately describe the depth or the magnitude of what Mr. Debnam had to and continues to experience in his effort to nurture and grow the Museum.

Mr. Debnam, the eldest of eleven living children, is no stranger to hardship and strife. At an early age, in Portland Oregon, he and his brother, who at the time was 22, were talking on the phone. His brother, who at the time was 22 years old, was in a telephone booth engaging in an ordinary conversation when he was brutally and savagely murdered by a racist for no particular reason other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Earl, is still obviously pained when he recounts it and that episode will understandably stay in the recesses of his psyche. It also obviously forced Earl to grow up rapidly and regardless of how horrific it was, it instilled in him the resolve it would take to take on the task of "nurturer" and "nourisher" of such a monumental task as erecting the Statewide African American Museum and Cultural Center.

Other events also played a key role in his life. After later working to establish the Albino Arts and Cultural Center, also in Portland, and serving as the Art director, Earl was obliged to relinquish his directorship.

Mr. Debnam successfully lobbied the government for a \$50,000 commitment to the project and got it off the ground. By the time other funding arrived Earl was no longer heading it up but left the project "organizationally and financially sound." Earl had to watch while something that he had put so much of his time and effort crumble and die. The group restructured but it no longer had the visionary and without the one who sees the vision, feels the vision and lives the vision, the vision dies. The building on the corner of Killingsworth and Williams, in Portland, Oregon, still stands vacant.

Perhaps those major events, as negative and hurtful as they were, are what prepared Earl to, "carry out the Lord's mandate", here in our little corner of the world. As he sees it, Earl, in his quest to see the vision, (perhaps a rebirth of the original Portland project) and to witness, (not from the sidelines but as again, one of the visionaries) the materialization of the miracle, the harvest from the toil, has accepted the Lord's directive.

Mr. Debnam, although very passionate is very humble as he speaks about his life's work and through being led by God's direction, he has reorganized his life, his priorities, time and energies to address the needs of the Museum and the community. He speaks of empowering the community, the value and love of Art and sharing the vast responsibility of bringing the Museum to fruition with unqualified passion paralleled to nothing or anyone I can recall conversing with.

In the 10 year struggle that he has selflessly devoted to the Museum, Earl has accumulated a portfolio stacked and packed with documentation that denotes, in black and white, his level of commitment to the project. Substance is what he has deemed to be essential in anyone's participation in the project. Providing concrete structure, producing monetary backing, creating substantial support; these are the things of substance that prove the depth of the commitment level as Earl sees it. With my having reviewed the AAHMCC Membership and Informational packet, which consists of over 50 pages of historically relevant, official, legal and technical documentation, I as the journalistic apprentice that I am can attest to the certainty that Mr. Debnam has lived up to his expectations of others.

Page after page elevates the project to a higher level. Each challenge is met with an appropriate and timely response that addresses the issue squarely. No one can ever say that Earl is a man of few words nor that he minces his words as is evidenced throughout the Informational packet. Professionalism is the word that comes to mind as I browsed through the various correspondence in the document. Included are copies of letters to and from the City of Seattle, Seattle Public Schools, signed by the Mayor and the Chief Financial Officer of the School District, addressed to Mr. Earl Debnam, President. city of Seattle Department of Neighborhoods, IRS, various attorneys at law, articles and numerous media coverage pinpointing Earl as the essence and driver of the dream, letters of support, bulletin updates, etc. etc.; all of these items are included in the packet, by the scores.

In an article entitled "Celebrate African American History Month!" Mr. Debnam is quoted, "Any body can build a museum, but it's a struggle for the community to have input in the process. We want a museum that will be hands on, that will address our cultural needs as well as the needs of our young people. We want a living institution - one that MAKES history as well as records it."

Again, a man true to his words, Earl Debnam not only visualizes a museum that makes history, he has laid the groundwork by setting an example. In a controversial (not a word foreign to his make-up) move that for Mr. Debnam lasted longer than any such event in history, he took up housekeeping in the very building he has now dedicated his life's work

to. He was not alone in his effort. The now familiar term "the original six" refers to Mr. Debnam's comrades-in-arms, so to speak, who all, at some point took up residence in the old Colman school building. Mr. Debnam diligently stood watch and manned his post to ensure the safety of the site. For Earl this unenviable responsibility lasted the better part of six years. While others in this community as well as all others were commuting on highways and bridges to their various work stations, Earl was waking up in his. Needless to say he took his position very seriously.

Ten years ago, according to Earl, the seed was planted and the steps after that were and are currently being taken for the sole purpose of giving the seed the proper nourishment and care so that the once it gets to a certain point, it grows on its own. "The museum is just about ready to grow on its own".

Earl is a multi-faceted, well versed man of many dimensions. However, during my conversation with him that lasted over two hours, I was most impressed with not only his unpenetrable resolve to be involved with this project to its completion, but more so his duality of character. This man who speaks forthrightly and "only the truth" while pulling no punches, using terms like, "the battle", and "the war" uses such harsh and descriptive terms in the same sentence he is talking about the reason that all of his efforts are "for those we haven't seen yet". The children not yet born. He is a very hard man, shaped by very difficult situations yet still a powerfully humble, quiet, peaceful man that understand he is really in all actuality being molded by the Hands of God.

As I began this conversation with Earl, for the purpose of the interview, I asked him "who are you, who is Mr. Earl Debnam and what are you all about?" Well, I am satisfied that he thoroughly answered my questions. He is a man of resolve and focus willing to put his life on the line for a principle.

Earl has every reason to believe that the journey he has traveled relative to the Museum is well worth his efforts. He can see the process as it has progressed and submits in response to my request for words of wisdom to those who may also "see the vision" as their life's work is that they simply "keep the vision alive".

In the move last week by what Earl deems as illegal procedure by the Board, they voted to remove him from office as President and in response to this matter Earl has deferred his responsibility as President of the Board to Mr. Charlie James, Vice-President, pending resolution of the matter. In a style consistent with his character he said "the issue is not a popularity issue - the issue is an organizational issue and it will be treated as such and because I have, I can and I will mandate my duties from any position, while the issue of me being or not being President is being challenged, the Museum must go forth".

As the author of this article believe it only fair and my responsibility to share with the readers Earl's grave concern with the action taken by the Board and his determination to expeditiously bring the matter to a close so that focus can be redirected back to its proper venue and that is, of course, the African American Heritage and Cultural Center. Let's do this just "because we can".

Ms. Sabir is a contributing free-lance writer and interview journalist. she is also an independent international entrepreneur and we welcome her contributions to the Journal.

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