Advertising

seattlepi.com

NWclas N Su Cont Seattle Post-

Jump to Weather | Traffic | Mariners | Seahawks | Sonics | Forums | Calendar

SEARCH><\t Search

Archives

WHOSE DREAM IS IT? OVERCOMING INFIGHTING IS KEY TO AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSEUM'S SUCCESS

By Kimberly Mills P-I Columnist

Sunday, August 18, 1996

Section: P-I Focus, Page: C1

Almost 11 years after Earl Debnam and a small band of community activists broke into the old Colman School, launching the longest occupation of a public building in the nation, the dream of an African-American heritage museum rising from the prominent spot on the Interstate 90 lid has never been closer to reality.

Signs of progress in the struggle to renovate the school as a major repository of African-American culture are abundant now where they were scarce for many years.

The board of the African-American Heritage Museum and Cultural Center has been expanded, through the efforts of Mayor Norm Rice, to include an impressive array of civic and corporate heavy-hitters led by Bob Flowers, a senior vice president at Washington Mutual Savings Bank, and punctuated with representatives from Microsoft and Seafirst Bank.

The project has a manager, offices and employees, including nine Summer Youth Employment Program teen-agers who are conducting a membership drive and telemarketing campaign and publicizing the museum at community events.

The board, for the first time, legally controls the 1910-era building, having negotiated a 90-day site control lease with Seattle Public Schools pending an outright sale for an estimated $445,000.

Donors with sizable checkbooks are coming on board, ranging from the Washington State Building for the Arts Council, down for $175,000, to Priscilla Bullitt Collins, who's given $15,000. It is hoped that the renovation, in phases for cash-flow purposes, will begin next year.

The dream that Debnam and his followers had one autumn night in 1985 appears to be materializing, having moved past the scrappy, showy but

MARKETPLACE

Jobs | Autos | Shopping

Homes | Rentals | Post an ad

CHECK IT OUT! Offers and deals from these great stores:

G.I. Joe's

Sports, Outdoor and More

The UPS Store

Washington Energy Services

Click here for special online offers from Washington Energy

Bartell Drugs

You will find 7 full days of great savings in our weekly ad flyer

OUR AFFILIATES
NWsource
K
M

eventually substanceless show of force that occupied a deteriorating public school for eight years and the community's attention off and on for the same period of time.

The dreamer, though, is missing from the action, and he has not gone quietly.

Saying that he and a handful of his stalwart followers were wrongfully deposed from the nonprofit board, Debnam has sought redress through a suit filed in King County Superior Court. He seeks reinstatement as president as well as damages plus interest and attorney fees.

Aside from the alleged parliamentary shenanigans that shifted power from Debnam to Flowers last winter, the suit makes this bold accusation: ``Defendant Flowers, and others, have directly acted in bad faith by falsely claiming that the plaintiff Debnam is disabled as a result of his stroke and is not competent to continue in his office of president.

``They have further acted in bad faith and in a defamatory way by claiming that Mr. Debnam is a liability to the organization and that he lacks the requisite `decorum,' when in fact, they are aware that he has been the lifeblood of the organization based upon the hard-won notoriety he has obtained and the historical servitude that he has contributed to the organization."

In an interview this summer, Debnam said, ``I want what rightly belongs to me."

He noted that he was elected board president in March 1995 for a two-year term. Within 60 days of Flowers and others joining the board at his invitation, Debnam said, they devised a way to wrest the presidency from him.

The newcomers ``wanted to brush me aside to put a fresh new horse in," Debnam said, calling Flowers, who is well-known for his civic activities, ``a downtown personality who knows when to smile, how to smile and who to smile at."

Debnam's ``fight is for the common man," he said, criticizing the new powers that be on the board as being ``out of touch in every conceivable way, but they're in touch with what their (corporate) superiors want to see."

``The people are behind me," Debnam said.

Flowers declined to comment on Debnam's charges, noting only that he had been removed as president and a board member for cause.

Aside from the suit's potential impact on the board financially, the allegations by Debnam - whose name is still synonymous with the museum drive - could hurt the capital campaign scheduled to begin in earnest at a brunch at Jazz Alley this fall.

Of the museum's estimated $14 million cost, the board wants to raise 42.9 percent from government; 14.3 percent each from corporations, foundations and individual gifts; 7.1 percent from tax credits; and 3.6 percent each from memberships and churches.

As Charlie James, publisher of the local African-American Business and Employment Journal, said, ``No one wants to be part of a process that has this kind of dissension going on.

``Earl's name has been associated with this movement for 10 years. I'm not sure what message this sends to them on the street," said James, a former board vice-president who was also removed last winter.

Many others disagreed with James that the project is floundering without Debnam.

``Earl is a nice person, and his involvement for 12 years is appreciated,'' said state Rep. Dawn Mason, who assisted the board in securing the $175,000 state grant. ``But we're talking about millions here, and confrontational style is not going to get it.''

Denice Hunt, the mayor's liaison to the project since 1991, agreed: ``Earl's agenda is advancing a revolution; it's built on talk. When you're reaching out to people with money you don't want to be telling them they're the source of the problem.''

Considering their relatively recent place in American history, Seattleites have not been shy about showcasing their achievements. There are museums with multipurpose themes, such as the Museum of History and Industry, the Children's Museum and the Museum of Flight, and there are museums dedicated to ethnic groups, such as the Nordic Heritage Museum and the Wing Luke Asian Museum.

But, as a February 1994 mayor's committee report states, ``There are no major repositories of African-American culture in Washington, despite the magnitude of the contributions of African Americans to the development of our state and region ... Much of the historical record that presently exists, in the form of artifacts and memory, will vanish because it is not properly collected and stored.

``Seattle is home to the largest number of African Americans in Washington, and it is here that African Americans have made, and continue to make, many of their most notable contributions ... The contributions of African Americans are as significant as those of any ethnic group, and yet they are not readily accessible to the people who live here.''

So the idea of rededicating a focal point of black life in Seattle - the well-known Central Area school - as a place to give witness to blacks' contributions in the Pacific Northwest was a natural in late 1985. The recently vacated Colman School beckoned to the activists; the school district had already built its replacement nearby after construction on the I-90 tunnel rendered the original building unstable.

In a story reminiscent of the Hispanics' takeover of Beacon Hill Elementary School in the 1970s and its transformation into El Centro de la Raza, a community services center, James remembers Debnam knocking on his door the night of the takeover and asking him to join in. James recalls, too, the nights that he walked the hallways, looking out the windows from time to time to see police officers on the grounds, ``not knowing if the night would be your last night in life.''

What new board members don't comprehend, James said, is that Debnam and his followers put their lives on the line for a considerable period of time. Indeed, over the eight years, the small group of interchangeable members camped out in the building - sans lights and water - in open defiance of a school district that wanted to dispose of its surplus building and a city bureaucracy that was slow to accede to demands for money to start the museum.

Hunt, having had an up-close-and-personal relationship with the group, put it this way. Saying they weren't people with ``gentle Seattle souls,'' she noted that ``protest was what they knew, and they expected that at the end of the protest that someone would give it (the building) to them.''

Debnam's and James' assessments of the epic occupation differ markedly from others, particularly the man occupying the mayor's office in 1985.

Charley Royer characterizes the period as marked by ``some real nasty meetings and hurt feelings.'' The objective, though worthy, ``had the worst building and the worst people involved. The activists had the attitude that if you had questions, you were a communist or an autocrat.''

The pace picked up in 1991 when Rice, who succeeded Royer in early 1990, decided the standoff should end and asked Hunt to mediate. Still it would be a few more years of often high-pitched rhetoric - and more city-funded feasibility studies - until the arduous negotiations with Debnam concluded one cold, rainy night in 1993.

``Somehow on this night they were tired and we were not,'' Hunt observed.

But while Debnam abandoned the building, he did not give up on his dream.

He and James assumed new roles on the mayor's committee, which was formed in 1993 to develop a new strategy to redo the 48,656-square-foot school as a museum and cultural center.

But now the dream was also being pursued by more mainstream African Americans such as Flowers, who in 1985 had supported the need for a museum but not the tactics being used to achieve it. Among those who joined Flowers in the revitalized effort were Dr. Millie Russell of the University of Washington and T.J. Vassar, former president of the Seattle School Board.

Again, tangible progress was hard to come by, Hunt recalled. ``It took them a whole year to bond because of the cultural diversity ... For the more middle-class, or professional people, it was a real test to see it through,'' she recalled, given the ``activists' lack of organizational skills.''

With Debnam still in a leadership role, the committee agreed on a mission for the museum, which persists today: The museum ``exists to promote and preserve the history, culture, traditions, and achievements of African Americans and will serve as a focal point for African Americans of all generations as well as for the broader community to celebrate and to share an appreciation and reverence for the African diaspora, through exhibits, tours, research, educational programs, performances, and various cultural activities.''

Potential functional centers within the facility were identified as archives or Northwest history, visual arts, music, international studies, conferencing, science and technology and revenue centers, including fashion and design.

As the project has crystallized in recent months, following the removal of Debnam and his most ardent admirers, an ambitious timeline has been devised. It calls for renovating Colman in phases, starting with a $2 million stabilization process that includes a new roof, asbestos removal, refurbishing the brick and terra cotta, and plumbing and electrical updates.

As envisioned now, the old gym would become a performing arts center. The first level would be devoted to concessions, gifts, classes and workshops. The second level would be set aside for exhibits, some of which would be permanent and some of which would circulate through other institutions, such as schools and community centers. The third level, last to be developed, would be mixed use - artists' lofts, special events space and possibly condominiums.

The board, now 31 strong, is also intent that the museum be privately managed, although various levels of government will be approached for grants. It's also planned that the museum be debt-free when it opens.

Given the years of minimal progress, the project manager, Pat Chandler, is heartened by the experiences of others in similar struggles. Building museums is a painstaking process necessarily complicated by the need to forge constituencies among the many groups that should have access, including schools, churches and historical societies.

``The more I study museums, the more I'm comforted to find out that some take 10 years or 15 years," Chandler said.

And, even as word of the litigation against the board seeps out, Chandler said the board has gone on record that Debnam's name never be lost from the quest. ``Earl's not being a part of the project is mostly in his hands," she said. ``There's always a role for him if he wants to be involved."

Creating a home in this city for African-American heritage and culture has been an endeavor marked by no small measure of irony.

Without Earl Debnam's heartfelt dedication and stick-to-it-ness, the struggle would not have evolved to this point.

Yet the museum probably could have had its grand opening by now if he hadn't been at the forefront.

Quite apart from the merits of Debnam's suit, which remain for a court to decide, the dream is within the grasp of the accomplished and dedicated members of the current board.

Although Debnam asserts the museum is not ``a bauble to be taken over by any corporate interest at the expense of community involvement," there is no credible evidence that has occurred - the claim is a smokescreen. Corporate interests must partner with community involvement or the longest occupation of a public building in the country will be for naught.

With or without Debnam, the challenges are daunting:

The board has to be realistic about funding sources. It's likely pie-in-the-sky to expect that 43 percent of the bottom line will be borne by government. In times of city departments merging and employees being laid off, the City Council is unlikely to ask voters to float bonds or levies in any significant amount for this museum. It remains to be seen whether, after well in excess of $200,000 has been spent on four feasibility studies (not counting staff time), the council will agree to more, sizable donations. The precedence isn't in the board's favor - other ethnic-oriented museums in Seattle, notably Wing Luke Asian Museum and Nordic Heritage Museum, weren't blessed with city largess.

It would be wasteful to duplicate programs already offered at other city facilities, such as the Langston Hughes Cultural Arts Center. Further, it's key that the museum attract professional personnel, particularly a top-drawer African-American curator - a commodity in great demand these days. And, the museum must be a first-rate operation appealing to distinguished area black artists - such as painters Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight and sculptors James Washington Jr. and Marita Dingus - so they will not only support the venture publicly but want their work displayed there.

With the would-be museum's increased visibility, not only in the black community but across the city, there is every possibility the dream will come true. If it does, it will be because more than a few people believed in it.

As Mason, whose legislative district includes the old Colman school, says, ``I don't think that anything that's based in the community is by any one person. The group dynamic that's sitting on the board is making it happen where it wasn't happening before."

c

This article contained at least one photo or illustration as described below:

Type: Photos, Map

Description: PAUL JOSEPH BROWN/P-I Photos (1) Earl Debnam, the activist who took the old Colman School hostage in his quest for a museum, is suing the current board.
(2) Heading up the revitalized museum board is Bob Flowers, who has built a strong reputation for his civic activities.
(3) Stabilizing the old Colman School, which is atop the I-90 lid, will require about $2 million.
(4) STEVE GREENBERG/P-I: Proposed African-American museum

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

101 Elliott Ave. W.
Seattle, WA 98119
(206) 448-8000

Home Delivery: (206) 464-2121 or (800) 542-0820

Send comments to newmedia@seattlepi.com
©1996-2006 Seattle Post-Intelligencer
Terms of Service/Privacy Policy

Customize your content
Customize your content

PImail also available by e-mail

RSS also available by RSS

RSS

AP: TOP HEADLINES
· Record-setting snow buries Northeast
· Cheney accidentally shoots fellow hunter
· Plane crashes into Calif. home; two dead
· Al-Jaafari named to head Iraq's new gov't
· Iran rejects charge of inflaming violence

* **more**

RSS

MOST READ
· A Microsoft iPod rival? Gates weighs in
· Senators: Cheney should be probed in leak
· 'Gilmore Girls' feud upset more than fans
· Attorney dies 15 months after shooting by rival
· Senate passes measure banning bestiality

* **more**

RSS

MOST PRINTED
· A Microsoft iPod rival? Gates weighs in
· Sheik depicted as a danger
· Oh, the places your luggage will go
· Senate passes measure banning bestiality
· FDA has lost its way, says former official

* **more**

RSS

MOST E-MAILED
· Senate passes measure banning bestiality
· Woman acquitted of injuring boyfriend's testicle
· 'Gilmore Girls' feud upset more than fans
· Oh, the places your luggage will go

· There are bargains in real estate

* **more**

POPULAR SOUNDOFFS

· Sound Off: Do you think the Super Bowl was fairly officiated?
· Not showing drawings responsible choice
· Should religion trump free speech?
· Freedom of speech under attack
· Warrantless Wiretaps: Ducking questions

* **more**

* help/troubleshoot

* customize your content

* disable myPI

* your account * customize your content

* disable myPI

* your account