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"We have a unique story to tell"

By Tyrone Beason

Seattle Times staff reporter

KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Carver Gayton holds a circa 1897 picture of his maternal great-grandfather, Lewis Clarke, a famous black abolitionist who escaped slavery in Kentucky. Gayton is director of the Northwest African American Museum, scheduled to open in 2007 in the former Colman School.

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Carver Gayton's appointment as director of the much-anticipated Northwest African American Museum may prove to be the slyest move yet in the bumpy 20-year struggle to establish the institution.

More than the museum's new public face, he is a living example of the local black community's history and influence.

"I don't consider myself necessarily an expert, but I do have a perspective on African-American history in the Northwest," the characteristically unassuming Gayton said recently.

In fact, the Seattle roots of the Gayton family go back to 1888, when John Thomas Gayton left Yazoo County, Miss., to work as a valet for a white doctor who was traveling here. He never left Seattle.

The self-educated family patriarch, a barber and federal-court librarian among other things, went on to become one of this city's most-prominent African Americans, helping found First African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Central District.

Now his grandson, Carver Gayton, 66, will have the opportunity to place his personal stamp on the community by heading up a project that embodies his own family's rich Seattle legacy.

Padding around his home at the top of a hill in Magnolia, where signed photographs of Robert F. Kennedy and artist Jacob Lawrence hang in the corridors, Gayton spoke proudly of the can-do attitude that has been passed down to him and that he has passed on to his family.

He and his wife, Carmen Walker Gayton, a real-estate agent, have a teenage son. He has three adult children from a previous marriage.

Gayton said that as museum director, he is eager to tell the story of why blacks migrated so far from their traditional bases in the South and East to Washington state, where even today African Americans make up less than a tenth of the population.

For Gayton's grandfather, the answer was wanderlust, a job opportunity and a perhaps a passion to start a new life.

"We really do have a unique story to tell about African-American history, tradition and culture in this part of the United States," Gayton said.

But how did living in the Northwest change the blacks who moved here? And — this is where the silver-haired but strikingly youthful Gayton grows most animated — how did African Americans influence the Northwest?

Eyewitness to history

A former Seattle School Board member, state employment-security director, Boeing executive, history teacher and FBI agent, Gayton has had a career as varied as they come.

On the museum project, he was a fund-raiser and a member of the director-search committee that threw out its three finalists last September, hiring him instead. He began Dec. 1.

For a time the project was stalled by infighting. Factions argued into the 1990s over where to build the museum, how to pay for it and who would oversee its development. But in 2003 the Seattle Urban League purchased the favored site — the old brick Colman School that overlooks Rainier Valley — and momentum finally began to build.

Construction of the 22,000-square-foot museum is expected to start early next year and cost $17.1 million in government and private funds. It will be the centerpiece of the Urban League Village, which will house 36 apartments on the upper two floors. The grand opening is scheduled for early 2007.

Gayton sees the building not only as a gateway to Seattle's black history but also as a point of pride for the entire city.

"I believe this is going to be the best African-American museum in the entire country," Gayton said boldly after accepting the job as director last fall.

After all, he often notes, many of the blacks with local ties who will be represented there — music producer Quincy Jones, singer Ray Charles, guitarist Jimi Hendrix, jazz great Ernestine Anderson, playwright August Wilson, pioneer-era tycoon William Grose — enjoyed success and influence far beyond the local African-American community.

"All of this works both ways," Gayton said. "We'd miss half the story if we only focused on Seattle's impact on blacks."

At the same time, the museum will capture the voices and stories of the everyday people who gave areas like Yesler Way, Jackson Street and the Madrona neighborhood their character.

Gayton is well-suited to tell that story.

Raised in Madrona, at the corner of 32nd Avenue and Pike Street, he remembers a childhood of Rockwellian harmony, where black and white kids played together.

He recalls Sunday mornings walking all the way to 14th Avenue to First AME Church.

In high school and at the University of Washington, Gayton was a star football player and a student leader. He and friends would trek to the Eagles building (now ACT Theatre) to concerts by Ray Charles, Dinah Washington, Little Richard and James Brown, back when he sang with the Hollywood Flames.

But Madrona, and the city, were changing all around the young Gayton.

"When I was born, we were about the only black family living up there," he said of his old neighborhood. "As it was told to me, we had a really hard time" in the beginning, Gayton said. "[White] kids would throw rocks. But when I grew up, it was pretty easygoing and relaxing."

During and after World War II, many blacks moved to Seattle seeking good-paying jobs at Boeing. Many settled in the Central Area.

Whites started moving out. By the mid-1950s, the area was mostly black.

Today, Gayton attributes his family's decision to live in the Central Area when it was white to a simple desire for a safe neighborhood with good schools. Of course, he realizes, the fact that his family was black made this choice something of a quiet provocation.

Gayton's mother, the late Virginia Clark Gayton, raised her eight children to conduct themselves with grace and never be ashamed of who they were.

"There was no one more fervent about her blackness," Gayton said. "She just kept that on our minds. My mother's family was not rich, but they had a rich sense of self."

Legacy of empowerment

These traits — self-determination as a form of soft activism, assimilation as a means of empowerment — are a family legacy.

But it's not an exclusive legacy, Gayton was quick to point out.

Grose, the hotel and restaurant magnate, may have been the richest black man in Seattle during the 1890s, but he expanded his influence by forging business relationships with white property owners, especially after the great fire of 1889.

Gayton wandered into his home office and pulled out a book, "Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke," published in 1854, written by two of his ancestors from Kentucky and Ohio.

Lewis Clarke was a famous black abolitionist and a former slave who escaped bondage in Kentucky along with his brother Milton. This branch of Gayton's family also migrated to Washington.

Clarke's father was a white Scotsman and his mother a black slave. Harriet Beecher Stowe used his firsthand accounts, and based one of the characters on him, in her anti-slavery novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Gayton is Clarke's maternal great-grandson. His middle name, Clark, is an homage to Lewis. Gayton's role as director of a black-history museum represents even more.

The road ahead

Urban League President James Kelly playfully reached for analogies to describe how bringing Gayton on board ratcheted up the project's momentum.

"It's like having Babe Ruth and Mickey Mantle on the same team," he said, noting Gayton's formidable management, networking and fund-raising skills. "Or Kobe and Shaq, *before* they started fighting."

Bob Flowers, an outgoing senior vice president at Washington Mutual and a longtime friend, described Gayton as well-connected man who can get things done "without holding a press conference."

"He's someone who makes people feel comfortable," Flowers said. "He can bring about change in a manner where you don't have to be confrontational."

Gayton is already making calls to personal contacts in the business world, such as Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz and the Ackerley family, on behalf of the museum.

Maybe it's the cool-headed FBI special agent in Gayton, or the countenance of man who hails from a family where high expectations go with the territory, but he shows no outward signs of the tough road ahead.

Even though Seattle and other cities such as Nashville, Chicago and Washington, D.C., are pushing forward with African-American museums, times have been hard for some of the nation's most established black-history institutions. Museums in Detroit and Philadelphia, for example, have faced budget shortfalls and attendance declines in recent years.

In Seattle, Urban League surveys show that "folks said they want more than artifacts behind glass," Kelly said. "Carver wants the images and artifacts, but also the stories behind them."

Gayton, Kelly and newly hired curator Barbara Earl Thomas aim to increase their odds of success by partnering with schools and scheduling music performances. An exhibit on Seattle's jazz scene might include an in-person appearance by Anderson, for example.

Most of all, Gayton said, the museum will be a kind of gathering place, a beacon on a hill.

"I don't just see the museum as a building," he said. "I see it as a symbol of our outreach to the community."

Ron Chew, director of the Wing Luke Asian Museum, which is raising money for its own $27.4 million expansion, says the African American Museum is an idea whose time has come — but whose success could take years.

"We have to retain credibility and legitimacy in our own community," Chew said. "But we also need crossover support ... that's a hard balance to maintain."

Some activists, such as the outspoken Omari Tahir-Garrett, have complained about some aspects of the project, like building housing units on the upper floors of the museum; Garrett would prefer dedicating the entire structure to black history and culture.

The Urban League's Kelly doesn't seem worried about Gayton's ability to build necessary bridges.

"When Carver comes to work, there is a synergy, man, that lifts up the place," Kelly said.

As for Gayton, his eyes are focused firmly on 2007.

"We can see the light at the end of the tunnel," Gayton said. "I really do have a passion to make sure this happens."

Tyrone Beason: 206-464-2251

or tbeason@seattletimes.com

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