

Black museums popular, but face funding crises

By Naeemah Khabir
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PHILADELPHIA (NNPA) — Every day is a struggle for the Marian Anderson Museum in South Philadelphia.

The two-story house, which the famous singer purchased in 1924, was converted into a museum in 1997. Although small, the museum had potential to attract large crowds curious about where the Philadelphia icon lived.

But today, the museum averages 50 visitors per month and faces financial hardships on a daily basis.

"We're seriously underfunded. That's our plight," said museum spokeswoman Phyllis Sims.

Unfortunately, it is also the plight of many African-American museums and cultural centers in Philadelphia. The financial crisis many of them are facing has caused residents to question whether the once bright futures of these institutions are fading.

In May, the African-American Museum in Philadelphia received \$135,000 from the city to help keep its doors open after laying off the museum's staff. Last month, Harry Harrison resigned as president of the 28-year-old institution.

Bernard Chavis, interim president and CEO of the African-American Museum, said the staff is working as independent contractors and will soon be reinstated as employees with benefits. In North Philadelphia last week, Walter Dallas, interim managing director at New Freedom Theatre, announced that all productions for the upcoming season were canceled due to financial constraints. The nation's oldest African-American theater has a \$4 million long-term debt, said Robert L. Archie, former board chairman. He added that \$600,000 is needed to meet current expenses.

Board members from both institutions said they are taking steps to get on the road to financial recovery, but some said lack of money is not the source of their problems.

"That's a lame excuse. Money can't be used as a scapegoat," said Charles L. Blockson, curator of the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection and a co-founder of the African-American Museum. "There are enough African-Americans who have the funding to contribute, but they don't. Don't tell me that there is no money when Mother Bethel

[AME Church] is building a museum. Why are they building if the money is drying up?"

Blockson said the Black museums have permanent exhibitions that will attract visitors. He pointed to his exhibit at the African-American Museum, which celebrates 200 years of Haiti's freedom. Blockson said it is the only exhibit of its kind in the country.

"We have to take our history and custom design it to what the new generation is looking for," said Miller Parker, a former board member of the museum. "Once people visit, they never go back because it's not exciting and stimulating. We can't clone other stuffy museums. We're not stuffy people."

Lack of attention-grabbing exhibits can mean huge losses for any museum, but within the last two years, Black museums have suffered the most. The Charles H. Wright Museum in Detroit experienced a 20 percent decline in attendance over six years, a significant loss for the \$38.4-million museum built in 1997.

In an effort to attract more visitors, the museum features an exhibit that recreates the city's Black entertainment districts, with a special display on Motown. Visitors will also learn how Detroit played a pivotal role in the auto industry and the Civil Rights Movement.

Rita Organ, director of exhibits at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Centers, said many Black museums must reinvent themselves and should focus on their particular city's history to maintain large audiences.

"Create a niche for yourself. Find the best content and highlight and expand," Organ said. "Don't try to cover the entire Black experience from Africa to America; let the national institutions do that."

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Centers in Cincinnati, which opened in August, is not the only national museum that showcases Black exhibits. The National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., is slated to open in 2012.

Board member Currie Ballard, the curator of Black exhibits at the Oklahoma Museum of History, said the burgeoning number of national Black museums has forced local institutions to look elsewhere for funding.

In fact, Baltimore is scheduled to open an African-American museum at the Inner Harbor. The museum is scheduled to open next year and will be the largest African-American museum on the East Coast.

"Every community needs to have some form of African-American flavor, but unfortunately in the last 10 years, everyone and their mother wants an African-American museum," Ballard said. "The reality is that corporate America deals with the larger, well-established museums. African-Americans

have to form some sort of revenue-making entity where we could fund these projects."

Ballard proposed a sin tax on tobacco and alcohol, with a portion of the money earmarked for Black museums.

"We suffer so horribly from both of those products," he said. "It would be a win-win situation."

Derek Hargreaves, board chairman of the New Freedom Theatre, said money generated from performing arts classes this season will assist in funding productions for next year. He also said the theater will look to garner

corporate support.

"We have a number of areas to work hard on, but given the limited resources, the smarter move was to continue the performing arts training program."

The African-American Museum in Philadelphia has also found a way to solve its problems. Chavis said he will initiate a capital campaign designed to create a \$2 million endowment.

He said the museum plans to sell more than 3,000 bricks that will adorn the entrance ranging from \$200 - \$500. Chavis said he is also looking

for corporate sponsors for each of the museum's four galleries.

He added that the museum will also encourage organizations to use its space for gatherings, which will also bring in money.

"The traditional way cultural institutions go about getting funds is not working. Everyone is going after the same piece of the pie," he said. "We have to use a proactive approach. If the effort is being made, the funds will come."

Naeemah Khabir writes for the Philadelphia Tribune.

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