

Black Historical Society seeking members

By Lés Pierres Streater
Sentinel-Voice

A dedicated group of community members assembled at the West Las Vegas Library on Saturday to start a membership drive to expand the development of the Las Vegas Black Historical Society Inc.

Many of the 50 residents attending the meeting have experienced and know of decades of historical information that they and members of their families established during their time living here. Some said they were the first to hold employment in certain jobs previously held by non-Blacks; some were the first Blacks to live in certain areas of town and other unique experiences.

The society, LVBHI, is a state-chartered corporation, founded to record with accuracy the vivid history of Blacks in Las Vegas.

Their purpose is to portray the contributions, accomplishments and achievements from the advent of Black pioneers to the present day and to be a continuing recorder of Black contributions to the growth and quality of life of Southern Nevada.

The society feels that it is important for them to establish the Black Historical and Cultural Center.

They want to operate it and maintain it to ensure a permanent exhibition of Black historical artifacts and memorabilia. They hope that creating a center will allow Blacks living in Las Vegas an opportunity to enthusiastically embrace the idea of the society and become active members.

According to Alice Key, one of the founding members of LVBHSI, "Earlier this year, Reverend [Jesse] Scott ran a series of meetings called 'Community Roots' and after one of those meetings, Sarann [Knight Preddy], Katherine [Joseph], Claytee [White] and I were talking about all of the things that have transpired before we arrived here, occurred during our presence here, and will occur in the future. We then met and formed the society where we had attorney John Bailey file the papers for incorporation with the State (of Nevada)."

Key, along with Katherine Joseph, Sarann Knight Preddy, Claytee White and Gwyn Brown are the founding members of the LVBHSI.

Key said, "We called this general membership meeting



Sentinel-Voice photo by Lés Pierres Streater

From left to right: Claytee White, director of the Oral History Research Center at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, stands next to other Las Vegas Black Historical Society founders—Alice Key, gaming pioneer Sarann Knight-Preddy and Katherine Joseph.

today to have people come out, participate and become members of the Society. We hope that it grows, and I am very pleased at the outcome of today's meeting. People appeared to be very enthusiastic about the society,, and I hope that many more will be able to join us because we need all sorts of people, young people, middle-aged people and newcomers to join us. Everyone joining today will become chartered members."

Brenda Williams, co-chair of the membership committee, along with Las Vegas Fire Chief David Washington, moderated the meeting.

Williams said, "Today's meeting was to invite the public to come out and allow them to tell their story about the history of Las Vegas... As we get more members, we plan to go out and gather oral history stories, photographs and videos. Our ultimate goal is to find a place to house our materials so that our young people and others can go there and learn about our history here in Las Vegas."

Commenting about the importance of establishing this Society and its benefits to our young people, Williams said, "I think what it will ultimately do is to show them what transpired in the past, and they need to step up to the plate and try to make something happen for the future so that their history can be told, and their children can benefit from their actions to create a better life for them and their families."

White, secretary and historian for the Society, shared her opinion about the formation of the group. She said, "I'm one of the founding members of the Las Vegas Black Historical Society Inc.

We hope to accomplish the collection of Black history here in Las Vegas and then expand into Clark County. We want to get it right, and that's the most important thing."

She added, "We need people to volunteer who are not afraid to be trained in collecting Black history, collecting and framing historical artifacts, conducting interviews, doing historical research, and preserving information. We want to train young people and get them to understand their history, and get involved and pass this information along to their family."

White noted, "We are celebrating our 100 years in Las Vegas, and the first Black man to settle here was John

Howell in the late 1890s. So our history goes further back than the first 100 years."

Verdia Turner, a participant in the meeting, gave her perspectives on the need to support this effort.

"It's a long time coming to give the true pioneers and founders of this community recognition that they deserve. We need to let people know of all of the positive things that happened in this community. The [Historic] West Side is the backbone of what is happening in Las Vegas for Blacks today," Turner said.

Etta McLemore Hodges lamented, "My parents came to Las Vegas in the late 1930s. My father worked for the federal government at the plant in Henderson and then he went to work at Hoover

Dam when they began construction there. We lived downtown and moved to the [Historic] West Side because all the Black people wanted to be together. This was a thriving place for businesses until the civil rights workers came in and decided that there should be integration, which killed the West Side."

"We will utilize oral interviewing, old newspaper clippings, and all other kinds of ways to collect Black history," White explained.

In addition, the founders plan to preserve Black history through other recordings, including photographic presentations, books and other media and disseminate

this historical information and data through seminars, forums, workshops, lectures and symposiums.

Their ultimate goal is to acquire a location to house these artifacts and information for the future.

Founders said they wanted to make it affordable for families and individuals by having membership categories — general, at \$25.00 and up for associate, small business and corporate-level memberships.

For more information about the society, you can contact them at (702) 791-3564 or write to 1100 W. Monroe Ave., Las Vegas, NV, 89106.



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Etta McLemore Hodges, a participant in the meeting, noted that her parents arrived in Las Vegas in the late 1930s.

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