

Whose Museum is This?

Dialogue stalled at African American Heritage Museum

by Georgi Page
The Free Press

Several months ago former African American Heritage Museum board president Earl Debnam was ousted from the leadership of the board that he created. He filed suit, complaining that the process of making decisions for the museum had lost all of its grassroots, democratic integrity. Now, another group, the Youth Action Committee (YAC), has hired an attorney, and charges the same.

They claim that repeated demands for information have gone unanswered. As members of the board they have demanded full disclosure- requesting cancelled checks, copies of contracts, job descriptions, etc. They have also sent several letters to board chairman Bob Flowers, and are still waiting for a response. The letters charge chairman Flowers and his appointees with disrespect, and call for Mr. Flowers to act on the resignations of the project's program director and assistant. They also call for announcement of all meetings to be made one week in advance, and for an open hiring process subject to approval by the board.

Mr. Flowers says he never saw the letters.

Merciful Allah, one of the members of the YAC, says that this is just one of the tactics Mr. Flowers uses to avoid accountability. Mr. Allah claims that decisions have been made by the executive council, or by the chairman, without the approval of the board. An African American architect was reportedly hired, then released by Mr. Flowers in favor of a white architect. The YAC also objects to the program director having a low-cost long distance line at her private residence. Mr. Allah would like to see the Youth Action Committee paid for the security it provides for the Heritage Museum and for its efforts to outline a course of programming for the museum that meets the needs of the community. He would like to see the YAC recognized for its devotion to the democratic ideals of the board.

The YAC was not informed that negotiations to purchase the Colman School were in their final phase. Chairman Flowers acknowledges that the focus has been on simply acquiring the building. From his perspective, and from Programming Director Sam Kinedin's perspective, answering the demands of the Youth Action Committee would take away from the immediate focus of the board, which is still on acquiring the building, period.

Even at this early, development stage there does seem to be an identity crisis forming. The Youth Action Committee has conceived of the museum as a cultural center along the lines of El Centro De La Raza, with child care, classes, a restaurant, and sports and health programs. Mr. Kinedin says that it is "not the board's mission to create a cultural center along the lines of El Centro De La Raza, After the building acquisition, if the community wants it, then maybe."

But the Youth Action Committee feels shut out of the process, and they have no faith that they will be allowed to participate fully in the crafting of the museum. They see the lack of engagement by the Executive Council as a "lack of organization."

Recently the YAC finally did receive copies of cancelled checks written on behalf of the board. They say there are 119 missing. The checks came only after the group led a protest outside of the Washington Mutual Tower, the bank where Mr. Flowers is a vice-president. They handed out flyers asking if Washington Mutual Customers would trust a bank that didn't allow them to check their balances. They then repeated their claim that they have not been given access to financial records of the museum. "They pulled him right out of a high-level meeting," Merciful Allah says, with obvious delight.

There is still a retreat planned for members of the board to come together over some of the issues that are dividing them. The Youth Action Committee, and Museum Founders Earl Debnam and Omari Tahir have not quite gotten over the shock of what it meant to invite Bob Flowers into their grassroots project. "They are the house niggas, and we are the field niggas," one museum volunteer observes, "and we want the tools in that house." This may mean that eventually they all have to begin to speak a new language, and they may even have to build a new house together, from the ground up, somewhere in the field.

WFP coverage of this story began in September 1996 with
["Trouble in the Ebony Tower"](#).



[\[Home\]](#) [\[This Issue's Directory\]](#) [\[WFP Index\]](#) [\[WFP Back Issues\]](#) [\[E-Mail WFP\]](#)

Contents this page were published in the January/February, 1998 edition of the *Washington Free Press*.

WFP, 1463 E. Republican #178, Seattle, WA -USA, 98112. -- WAFreepress@gmail.com

Copyright © 1998 WFP Collective, Inc.