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Business: Sunday, September 12, 1999

African-American Museum Up Against Oct. 31 Deadline

Alex Fryer
Seattle Times Staff Reporter

It is a story that has become almost legendary in Seattle's Central Area.

On a cold November day in 1985, four African-American activists broke into the old **Colman School** just south of Interstate 90. Their goal: to stay in the surplus property until public officials agreed to turn it into an African-American **museum**, a place to celebrate the city's black experience through art and youth programs.

There was an inquiry call from Mayor Charles Royer to the activists that evening, but little official response. The occupation continued for the next eight years, supported by neighbors bringing in plates of food and the few dollars gathered in the collection plates of black churches. It was hailed as the longest act of civil disobedience in the nation's history.

Almost a decade after the break-in, city and county tax-dollars began to flow to the project. Last year, the Seattle **school** district penned a deal to sell **Colman School** to **museum** boosters at a price far below market value. The dream seemed close to becoming reality.

Today, after a public investment of more than \$700,000 in planning and development costs, the **museum** effort is at a difficult crossroads.

Two different boards of directors say they are the true leaders of the African American Heritage **Museum**. The division has effectively paralyzed the project. It has also tried the patience of city and **school**-district officials, who are under increasing pressure from neighbors to do something with the derelict building.

Last month, the **school** district told the **museum** that the contract to sell **Colman School** for \$329,000 would be scrapped on Oct. 31 unless the district is paid a delinquent \$49,000 down payment and missed semiannual payments totaling \$158,739.

Even longtime supporters of the **museum** fear the deadline may spell the end of the dream.

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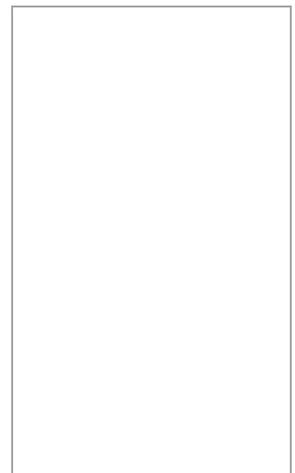
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The effort to build an African-American **museum** in Seattle is a tangled tale of competing egos, personality clashes and mistrust. There have been allegations of mismanagement and desperate calls for unity. A highly charged current of racial politics electrified almost every meeting and planning discussion, dividing the board and setting one-time cohorts against each other.

The African-American **museum** seemed to have everything going for it: a compelling history, community support and public dollars.

So far, consensus has proved impossible. And **Colman School** looks very much like it did 15 years ago.

THE OCCUPATION

To understand where the idea of an African-American **museum** at **Colman School** came from, you have to go back to the Central Area in the early 1980s.

Relations between the African-American community and the police were strained by many of the same allegations leveled today: that officers targeted black men and that police concentrated on the Central Area, making the neighborhood feel more like an occupied zone than a community.

When the Police Department announced plans to demolish a fourplex apartment at 23rd Avenue South and East Yesler Way to build a new precinct headquarters, protesters rallied, contending the community needed housing and youth centers more.

The city withdrew the proposal in 1982, but the effort left organizers such as Omari Tahir-Garrett with a lingering sense that the African-American community needed to rally around something proactive.

"We're always against something. But what are we for? I used to play sports. I know that you can't win by just playing defense," said Tahir-Garrett. "That's where the concept of the **museum** came from."

In the summer of 1983, more than 400 Central Area residents petitioned Royer to create a black heritage center.

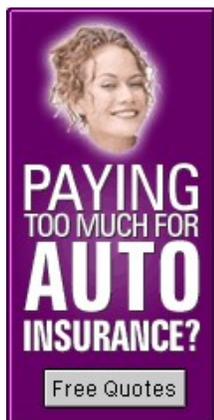
With encouragement from City Hall, the African American Heritage **Museum** Task Force was formed, and on May 30, 1985, determined that **Colman School** would be an ideal site.

When rumors spread that the **school** district was planning to sell the building to the state Department of Transportation, **museum** supporters sprang to action.

There was snow on the ground on Nov. 14 when Garrett, Earl Debnam and two others broke through a window and announced that they were occupying the building. It was meant to be a dramatic gesture, but the message was one of hope, said Debnam.

"It was born kind of rough, but the emphasis has always been on art, culture and youth," he said. "We had to take a hard posture to stay true to the vision of teaching our children about our heritage."

Debnam joined the action thinking he'd be there for three weeks. He ended up living in **Colman School** for the next eight years.



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He bathed with a bucket of water and ran a generator to watch television. Postal carriers delivered his mail there. His voter registration card still lists **Colman School** as his permanent address.

Debnam spent much of the time by himself, but he knew he was not alone.

"The white community embraced us. The gay community was solid behind us. We had a lot of public support," he said.

Six months into the occupation, Debnam walked the empty halls of **Colman School**, thinking about all the obligations he had put aside to focus on the **museum**, including painting his house.

"I thought, 'What am I doing here?'" Debnam remembered. "I could die in here. I've got to go home and do some painting.' At that point a voice came to me."

The voice asked Debnam if he was prepared to carry out a divine mission to complete the **museum**, no matter what the cost.

"I knew then I could sacrifice my house, and everything else for the **museum**. The **museum** is going to happen. We've survived a lot of turmoil."

CITY JOINS THE EFFORT

According to documents released under a public disclosure request by The Seattle Times, the city of Seattle began feasibility studies for a **museum** in 1986. From 1986 to 1995, the city spent about \$362,549 on the project, most of it for city employees to work on the **museum** part time.

In 1993, Mayor Norm Rice convened a special committee to consider the future of the project. With a signal from the Rice administration and the **school** district that the **museum** was taken seriously, Debnam and others ended their occupation.

The new multi-ethnic committee included both Debnam and Tahir-Garrett, as well as business leaders such as Herman McKinney, bond attorney Jay Reich and Washington Mutual Executive Robert Flowers, a graduate of Garfield High **School** who knew many of the activists from childhood.

That group eventually evolved into the African American Heritage **Museum** & Cultural Center, headed by James Fearn, an official with the Seattle office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. When Fearn left to work overseas, Flowers replaced him as chair.

"All I knew coming in was that they tried to get funding, but there were no funds in the treasury," said Flowers. "Our job was to get some credibility and give some structure to the organization."

Although the business leaders and community activists pledged to work together, the facade of cooperation quickly began to crumble.

Some of the activists believed the city owed the African-American community a **museum**, and that it should promote black pride. They bandied about ideas such as creating a television and radio station, a restaurant, child-care center, naturopathic clinic and sports leagues.

Others wanted to create something that would be more inclusive and carry the support of major arts supporters such as the Paul Allen Foundation and companies such as Boeing and Microsoft. Programs would include oral

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histories of prominent African-Americans such as artist Jacob Lawrence, a performing arts center and cultural events.

The differences of opinion began to manifest in the tiniest of ways.

At a board meeting on Nov. 14, 1995, Debnam and others unveiled a design of a Nigerian mask they wanted to print on fund-raising T-shirts.

Some of the business leaders objected to the design, saying the eyes on the mask were "too militant and adversarial," according to minutes of the meeting.

"They said something along the lines of: 'We need to put a new image on this (effort). Let's be P.C. and change our image,'" remembered Debnam. "That was the first sign of the rift that was coming."

Less than a month later, Flowers argued before the board that Debnam should be removed as president. The **museum** needed the kind of leader who could persuade investors to write million-dollar checks, said Flowers. The community had no confidence in the current board, whose members could not express an embraceable and realistic vision, he said.

After a secret ballot, Debnam was removed from office. On April 10, 1996, the board voted to expel him from the organization entirely.

Debnam filed a lawsuit against the **museum** board to regain his seat, charging that he was unfairly removed because the **museum** project had suddenly become politically desirable.

In an affidavit in support of Debnam's suit, the Rev. Robert Jeffrey of New Hope Church wrote that "to characterize Earl as unable to act with proper decorum, emotion and difficult to deal with, is in my opinion, using prejudicial terms that are often applied to black men in order to discredit them."

Debnam lost the suit, and hasn't been directly involved with the project since. He wasn't the only founding activist kicked off the board, and his legal action wouldn't be the last.

THE CITY MONEY

By 1997, the city of Seattle began to fund the project directly. The city reimbursed the **museum** board for development-related expenses such as architectural drawings, legal work and structural assessments of **Colman School**.

The city set aside \$250,000 in 1997, and another \$250,000 the following year. The city also reserved \$34,000 in a special account for the down payment to the **school** district.

According to a 1997 memo that sealed the deal between the city and the **museum**, the project would have several public benefits. It would become a tourist destination and would educate thousands of local **school** children. Most important, as a repository of stories and artifacts of black culture, the **museum** "represents the identity of a people whose contributions to the economic, political and cultural life of the region has been under-represented and undervalued."

The public subsidy allowed the **museum** board to hire a full-time executive director at an annual salary of \$50,000. The board also paid an assistant director \$35,000.

The architectural and legal services didn't come cheap, either.

An attorney for the now-defunct firm Bogle & Gates worked 8 1/2 hours over two days for the **museum**. The bill came to \$1,740.78, a legitimate sum for corporate attorneys charging \$200 an hour but considered highway robbery by some of the activists on the board.

By the end of 1997, the project had used up the entire \$250,000. The bulk of the money, around \$115,149, was spent on personnel salaries and office space. Architectural services amounted to \$58,268; legal costs came to \$15,405.

That same year, the King County Office of Cultural Resources awarded the **museum** an additional \$50,000 to seal the roof of the **school**.

Private funding included a grant from the community charity Seattle Foundation for \$15,000, and \$15,000 from Safeco. According to city documents, former King Broadcasting co-owner Priscilla Collins donated \$15,000. Collins did not respond to repeated interview requests for this story.

Dissatisfied with the way the money was being handled, Tahir-Garrett began to question Flowers and others about the reimbursements.

One of his friends, Muhammad Farrakhan, called the Seattle office of the FBI on Dec. 24, 1997, to report widespread corruption and mismanagement on the **museum** board. On Jan. 5, 1998, Tahir-Garrett sent a handwritten note to the Washington State Auditor, claiming that public funds had been misappropriated and urging an audit of the **museum**.

The auditor's office reviewed the invoices and concluded on Feb. 4, 1998, that the expenses reimbursed by the city were reasonable and allowable under the agreement.

That did little to quell concerns by Tahir-Garrett that the **museum** board was out of control. By then, the feeling was mutual.

DISCORD FRACTURES BOARD

On March 11, 1998, the board of the African American Heritage **Museum & Cultural Center** met to consider removing Tahir-Garrett from the organization. He had physically threatened board members and staff and made false accusations of fraud, among other alleged infractions, according to a one-page handout distributed to the board.

Before the directors voted to remove Tahir-Garrett, he made a surprise announcement. The day before the meeting, he had gone to Olympia and filed papers with the Secretary of State's Office naming himself as president of the African American Heritage **Museum** and listing a new slate of board of directors, including his son, Kwame, as vice president. The Secretary of State's Office registers and licenses private corporations and fund-raising organizations.

Three days later, the board chaired by Bob Flowers filed an amended annual report with the secretary of state naming themselves as the true leaders of the **museum**.

On March 17, Tahir-Garrett countered by filing yet another amended report.

All in all, the **museum** board changed hands five times last year. The last filing with the secretary of state, on Feb. 25 this year, named Tahir-Garrett as president.

According to officials from the secretary of state, Tahir-Garrett is legally in charge of the African American Heritage **Museum**. That also makes him responsible for delinquent financial reports that should have been filed with the secretary of state for the **museum** from 1996 to 1998.

On March 23, Tahir-Garrett sent a complaint on **museum** letterhead to the city of Seattle Human Rights Commission claiming that the board led by Flowers discriminated against blacks. The complaint also stated that a disproportionate amount of **museum** contracts had been awarded to Jewish-owned companies.

Tahir-Garrett also tried and failed to obtain a restraining order prohibiting Flowers from representing himself as leader of the **museum** board.

Officials at the city Department of Neighborhoods, which was administering the money, quickly got wind of what had happened to the **museum** board. Given the competing claims for ownership, the city turned off the spigot of public money on March 25, 1998.

Since then, the **museum** effort has hung in limbo. Early last month, the **school** district set its Oct. 31 deadline to sell **Colman School** if no payment or progress is made.

'OUR REPARATIONS'

Tahir-Garrett speaks as if he's running out of breath. The words seemingly cannot come fast enough.

"The biggest facility we have for youth in our community is the youth detention center," he says, standing on **Colman School** property.

"This," he says sweeping a hand past the brick **school** building, "is our reparations for the Europeans kidnapping us from Africa and stripping us of history."

He is on ground that was once a playfield. It is now pebble-strewn and desolate, ringed by locked fences. Except for the occasional maintenance worker, no one has been inside **Colman School** for years. It is said to be infested with pigeons and rats.

The doors and windows are covered with plywood. The only artistic expression around the **school** is a trail of incomprehensible graffiti.

Ask him what derailed the African American Heritage **Museum**, and Tahir-Garrett has fast answers: "Once people see an idea, they come in and milk all the money and leave a shell."

"The bottom line is - where is all the money? How do you spend all this money and end up with nothing? There's not even windows in the building."

Flowers says the architects, consultants and structural engineers were about six months away from completing the first set of feasibility studies when the city cut off funding. The drawings are in storage and could be finished with another infusion of cash, he said.

More public money has already been spent on the African American Heritage **Museum** than either the Wing Luke Asian **Museum** or the Nordic

Heritage **Museum**. And that's appropriate, said Flowers, considering the magnitude of fixing up the 48,000-square-foot former **school**.

The total cost of developing the **museum** at **Colman School** is estimated at \$10 million to \$15 million.

City staff members say the money has been well spent so far. If internal conflicts defeat the project, however, the public will have sacrificed a great deal of financial resources for nothing.

"You can pretty much say they have had good financial stewardship. They have obviously had problems with policy stewardship," said Steve Sheppard, development specialist at the city Department of Neighborhoods.

"But if you stop now, it's hard to feel good about all of the work that's been done."

According to city documents, \$980,577 has been allocated to activities related to the African American Heritage **Museum** from 1986 to 1998. Of that amount, \$697,300 has been spent, and \$261,700 remains allocated or in reserve.

Last year, the City Council awarded the **museum** an additional \$250,000 for fiscal year 2000. It was the third-highest council-added appropriation in the biennium.

Flowers said he considered the money grossly insufficient; he had asked for \$1.5 million for three years.

Despite the clean slate given by the Washington state auditor, there have been financial questions raised about the project.

Last January, the city wrote a \$4,029.17 check to the African American Heritage **Museum**. For accounting reasons, the money was meant to be sent back to the city to reimburse maintenance services at **Colman School**.

Instead of being returned to the city, the funds disappeared. Tahir-Garrett said he cashed the check, commissioned a study of the **museum** and paid off some miscellaneous bills.

So far, the city has not taken legal action to recover the check.

"I welcome them to charge me with felony theft," said Tahir-Garrett. "They are trying to victimize the whistle-blower."

'OUR ONLY CHALLENGE'

The conflicts surrounding the **museum** effort may have as much to do with personality as philosophy. In that respect, the **school**-district deadline is not the only challenge facing the **museum**.

Flowers has a new job in California, and says he will soon be leaving the board.

James Fearn, chair of the **museum** in 1993, has been approached to lead again. The move is welcomed by several of the original activists, but Fearn says he remains uncommitted.

"The issue for me is: Is there something that can be accomplished here?" he said. "I'm not at all convinced that this is a situation that can be salvageable."

"If Bob is not able to hold all these factions together, I have no reason to believe I could do any better."

Ultimately, says Fearn, he may not be able to influence the outcome of the **museum** effort. The future of **Colman School**, he says, may instead rest in the hands of Tahir-Garrett.

"Omari's passion may well end up being the end of the whole thing. It depends on how he elects to comport himself when this effort proceeds," said Fearn.

"Omari can be quite charming, and he can be perceived as an absolute monster. If Omari ends up killing it, Omari will understand that Omari killed it. And there is a possibility of that. I don't want to minimize that."

For his part, Tahir-Garrett says he does not need city help to build the project, although he is not specific how the facility could become reality with private donations alone.

In the end, the **school** board will have final say on what to do with **Colman School**. Instead of back payments, it's possible the board may accept a resubmitted plan from the **museum** to maintain the sale agreement, said Dan Graczyk, director of logistics for the **school** district.

According to almost everybody involved with the **museum**, one thing is clear: The effort cannot proceed with two groups claiming leadership.

Fearn says he is trying to combine both efforts, although several members of the Flowers board indicated they were unwilling to work with Tahir-Garrett.

At a meeting on Wednesday, Tahir-Garrett and his group decided they were not interested in taking a back seat in the project, and were considering filing further legal action against the Flowers board.

The Wednesday meeting made Fearn only more pessimistic about the museum's chances.

The **school** district's deadline has also sparked intense soul-searching on behalf of the museum's myriad supporters and activists.

Although he hasn't been involved with the board for four years, Earl Debnam still follows the tangled history of the project. With a little work, he can dig around his office and produce an architectural drawing of the proposed **museum**, dated April 1, 1992. He has notebooks thick with letters to public officials asking them to support the **museum**.

He has watched the fight for control of the board with a sense of dread, but remains convinced that the voice that came to him during his occupation of **Colman School** did not lie.

"I was visited by the Lord and He told me when I initiated the battle in 1985 that I was going to succeed," he said. "The vast, vast majority of folks want us to succeed. The money will flow when we have a sense of togetherness. That's our only challenge. We've got to conquer our own selves."

Alex Fryer's phone message number is 206-464-8124. His e-mail address is: afryer@seattletimes.com

----- The dream that almost came true -----

Early 1980s: **Colman School** scheduled for demolition as part of the I-90 expansion project.

Summer 1981: Protesters rally against proposed police precinct headquarters at 23rd Avenue South and East Yesler Way. Activists say community needs housing and youth activities.

April 12, 1982: City Council's Land Use Committee votes to scrap the proposed police building, saying the project had become too controversial.

Nov. 14, 1985: Four African-American activists break into **Colman School** to create a black-history **museum**. The occupation lasts eight years.

February 1994: Mayor's African American Heritage **Museum** & Cultural Center Committee releases final report. The committee states that **museum** should be a private rather than a city-owned facility.

Jan. 1, 1995: African American Heritage **Museum** & Cultural Center formally established as a not-for-profit organization.

Feb. 10, 1996: City of Seattle formalizes grant of \$250,000 in both 1997 and 1998 to African American Heritage **Museum**.

Jan. 16, 1998: Seattle **School** District and African American Heritage **Museum** enter into real-estate contract for the sale of the old **Colman School**.

Mar. 10, 1998: Omari Tahir-Garrett files paperwork with state Secretary of State naming himself as president of **museum** board and his son as vice-president. The board subsequently changes leadership five times.

Mar. 25, 1998: City cuts off funds to **museum**. Steve Sheppard, staff member of city Department of Neighborhoods, writes to African American Heritage **Museum** that further payments would be withheld pending resolution of the board's legal status.

Sept. 17, 1998: Sheppard writes a memo to Jim Diers, director of city Department of Neighborhoods, stating: "The City funds were intended to allow the **museum** project to undertake pre-development, organizational development, and fund-raising activities needed to build an independent organization capable of raising private funds to construct and operate the facility. One can reasonably argue that this has not occurred. . . . To a certain extent, the project is in disarray. . . . Since it was intended that the past \$534,000 would make the project independent of continuing City funding, and since this appears to have failed, is it appropriate for the City to continue providing funds?"

Nov. 1998: City Council passes 1999-2000 budget. Included in budget for fiscal year 2000 is \$250,000 for the African American Heritage **Museum**. The funds can only be used for exhibits and other capital costs once the **museum** is open.

Oct. 31, 1999: Seattle **School** District deadline by which African American Heritage **Museum** must pay delinquent \$49,000 downpayment on **Colman School**.

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