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Local News: Friday, December 10, 1999

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Fight Over School Building Goes On -- Activist's Arrest There During WTO Is Latest Chapter

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Here's an update on what's happened in the nearly 15-year struggle to build an African-American **museum** in Seattle:

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There's been one arrest, one punch in the face and a whole lot of bad feelings.

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And still, the effort continues.

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Omari Tahir-Garrett was one of the original activists who broke into the former **Colman School** in 1985 to force the city to create a black history **museum** there.

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Last week, he again entered the **school**, but with much different results.

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Tahir-Garrett was charged with property damage and criminal trespass. He is scheduled to appear in Municipal Court on Dec. 27.

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Tahir-Garrett said he broke through a boarded-up door Nov. 29 because he wanted to occupy the building and provide shelter for demonstrators in town for the World Trade Organization conference.

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A security guard posted by the Seattle **School** District noticed a door ajar and called police.

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After searching the building, officers called for a canine unit. In minutes, the dog found Tahir-Garrett in the attic, where he was arrested.

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The outcome was a far cry from Tahir-Garrett's last break-in at **Colman School**, just south of Interstate 90.

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The occupation lasted eight years and was hailed as the longest act of civil disobedience in the nation's history.

In 1993, when city money began to flow to the **museum** project, the activists abandoned the occupation.

Since then, the project has been mired in acrimony. Public funding was cut off last year after various city agencies spent about \$700,000 in planning and development costs.

The problem is leadership: Two different boards of directors claim to be in charge of the African American Heritage **Museum**.

Tahir-Garrett leads one of the groups; the other is headed by attorney James Fearn, an official in the Seattle office of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. The Seattle **School** District said it would deal only with Fearn.

In early November, the district extended a deadline of Oct. 31 for **museum** boosters to pay a delinquent \$49,000 down payment for the property and semi-annual payments totaling \$158,739.

Under Fearn's plan, developer Murray Franklyn would build about 40 apartment units in exchange for creating a **museum** of at least 10,000 square feet.

Fearn is lobbying the city to release \$10,000 that was set aside for the project but never spent. The money would pay for a lawyer to hash out a deal between the **museum** board and Murray Franklyn.

Fearn also has tried to reconcile the two groups and encourage followers of Tahir-Garrett to join his project. Tahir-Garrett vehemently opposes any plan to build apartments on the property.

A reconciliation meeting between the two factions at New Hope Baptist Church last month broke down after Fearn was punched in the face by one of Tahir-Garrett's supporters. The blow knocked the glasses off his face, said Fearn, who later filed a police report.

The incident made Fearn rethink his commitment to the project, but, for now, he has vowed to continue.

"All my friends and family have said this is not worth it," he said. "But it's not something to yield in the face of."

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

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