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Local News: Friday, March 28, 2003

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Urban League boss fulfills dream: a home for black history here

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By [Beth Kaiman](#)

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The idea was civic-minded, socially important and so expensive and potentially divisive that a lot of people didn't give James Kelly much of a chance.

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But yesterday, the president of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle got the keys to the old **Colman School** and to his long-held dream: an African-American history **museum** that would tell the stories of the community's well-known greats, such as musicians Jimi Hendrix and Quincy Jones, and of the lesser-known powerhouses — black merchants, lumbermen, activists and educators — who helped shape Seattle and the Pacific Northwest.

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"We have a generation of young people who only know their people," Kelly said. "There is history and legacy. There is more to know."

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Ownership of the 93-year-old **school** near the Interstate 90 lid was transferred yesterday to the Urban League, which paid \$804,000 to the Seattle **School** District, a price that is less than half the assessed valuation.

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The stately brick building, which closed in 1985, will need a lot of work to restore its dignity and complete plans that include a **museum** of at least 12,000 square feet, commercial office space and 40 apartments.

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Construction on the Urban League Village at **Colman School** could start in December, said Shani Taha, project coordinator.

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The moderately priced apartments probably would be finished first. If all goes according

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to plan, the **museum** would open in spring 2005. The Urban League will not operate the **museum**; rather, it will serve as landlord for the complex and, for the foreseeable future, as chief fund-raiser.

The cost has been put at \$17 million, and the Urban League is seeking money from several sources.

Officials talked Wednesday with U.S. Rep. Jennifer Dunn, R-Bellevue, and earlier with other members of the state's congressional delegation. Kelly also has made pitches for state and local money. The city contributed \$400,000 to help get the project to this point.

The Urban League also hopes to get a \$6 million loan, Taha said, and plans to repay the money mostly from rent on the apartments and offices.

But private donations will be key, especially from corporations such as Microsoft, which the Urban League said has pledged \$300,000 for computers for the **museum**.

The prospect of raising millions of dollars is daunting, especially given the ailing economy and uncertainty surrounding the war. And, Kelly pointed out, "we're a social-justice organization," and not usually a landlord or **museum** operator. He said the group will seek **museum** experts, appoint a committee and **museum** director and solicit opinions from the community in a series of meetings.

The road ahead may be tough, but maybe the trip won't take as long. The quest to turn **Colman School** into a black-history **museum** dates to 1985, when activists broke in and occupied the site.

The takeover ended eight years later, when Mayor Norm Rice pledged his support, but the effort stalled when **museum** organizers split. Two groups claimed they were the true leaders of the **museum**, and public funding stopped.

Earl Debnam, one of those who occupied the building, thinks the Urban League wrongly took over the project. He said the Urban League's courting of corporate donors amounts to "funding from an elitist point of view."

Urban League officials are determined to see the project through. Tacoma has an African-American history **museum** operating out of a storefront. Boise, Idaho, has one, too. "Seattle is a little behind," Taha said. "But we're getting there."

**School** scheduled for demolition as part of the Interstate 90 expansion. **Nov. 14, 1985:** Four African-American activists break into **Colman School** to create a black-history **museum**. The occupation lasts eight years.

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

**Jan. 16, 1998:** Seattle **School** District and African American Heritage **Museum** enter into a real-estate contract for the sale of the old **Colman School**. **Oct. 31, 1999:** Backers of African American Heritage **Museum** fail to make \$200,000 in delinquent payments on \$329,000 purchase agreement. Process is clouded by split between two competing boards of directors that claim to represent the **museum**.

**November 1999:** **School** Board agrees to renegotiate \$329,000 purchase agreement with **museum** group led by former Department of Housing and Urban Development official James Fearn.

**July 2000:** Deadline for purchase passes without a required \$471,000 payment.

**February 2001:** Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle offers its own proposal and puts up \$25,000 as part of agreement to buy the **school** for \$1.2 million. League plans Urban League Village with a **museum**, offices and apartments.

**Late 2002 and early 2003:** Price is renegotiated when Urban League presents a contractor's bid suggesting a lower value for the deteriorating building.

**March 5, 2003:** Seattle **School** Board approves sale of **school** to Urban League for \$804,000.

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