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Friday, October 8, 2004

African American museum panel finds a leader

Carver Gayton has deep roots in community

By **JOHN IWASAKI**
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

A committee looking for someone to turn the abandoned Colman School in Seattle into an African American museum searched the country, then realized that the best candidate was in its midst.

Carver Gayton, whose family's roots in Washington stretch back five generations, will become the chief operations officer for a project with a bumpy past that stretches two decades. His extensive résumé includes a stint as commissioner of the state Department of Employment Security.

"We couldn't ask for a better leader to take us to the next and final phase," said James Kelly, president of the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle. "He has impeccable credentials."

Kelly announced Gayton's selection yesterday, nearly 20 months after the Seattle School Board agreed to sell the property to the Urban League for \$804,000.

The museum would anchor the Urban League Village at Colman School, a \$17.1 million project on the Interstate 90 lid between the Central District and Rainier Valley. The ground floor would be a 22,000- square-foot museum, with 36 mixed-income apartments on the top two floors.

Construction is planned to begin in January 2006, with the museum opening in early 2007.

"Most major cities in the United States have an African American museum," said Gayton, 65. "I think the time has come. Twenty years is a long time to be deliberating on this. The fund raising has been significant, and important work needs to be done to finish that."

Gayton, who consults and teaches at the University of Washington's Evans Schools of Public Affairs and was college relations director for The Boeing Co., serves on a variety of national, state and local boards.

He was even helping to review candidates for the museum leadership post. But as he did so, fellow screening committee member Constance Rice realized the search was over.

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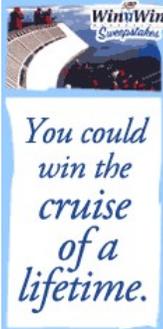
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"I thought, 'Let's not shop too far from home for an outstanding leader, because we've got one right at the table,'" said Rice, former vice chancellor of the Seattle Community College District.

"He's very charismatic, and he comes from a family of great legacy in Washington state, not just Seattle. Carver's a very service-oriented person. He brings his own authenticity to a well-thought-out project. He's a seasoned executive with strong management skills."

Beyond that, Rice said, Gayton provides "the credibility of the richness of what we seek to celebrate: the African American contribution of the Pacific Northwest."

Peter Donnelly, president and CEO of ArtsFund and another screening committee member, said Gayton emerged as a logical candidate because of his deep experience in the private and public sectors.

"He's certainly an important member of the community that will be served by this museum," Donnelly said. "We're delighted that he's interested. He didn't jump at it right from the beginning, but I think James Kelly must have been very persuasive."

Gayton said the offer, which he decided Wednesday to accept, "came out of left field." He starts work Dec. 1.

His commitment to the project started years ago when he served as a co-chairman of the museum's fund-raising campaign.

The Urban League still needs about \$3.2 million to reach its goal. It previously raised about \$4.7 million in pledges and has identified \$6 million in housing tax credits and \$3 million in large private donations.

Colman School, built in 1909, was the first school many African American children attended in Seattle.

After the school closed in 1985, a group of activists broke into the vacant building and demanded that it be turned into a museum. Some occupied the space for eight years.

By the late 1990s, backers of the proposed museum bickered and split into two competing factions. The Urban League stepped in and bought the property last year.

Gayton said the museum has personal meaning, given that his grandfather, John T. Gayton, moved from Mississippi to Seattle in 1888.

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"It's important for the young people, African Americans, to know their contributions," he said. "Beyond that, it's important for the entire community. We're not a separate entity.

"The African American community had a role to play in the cultural and historical development of this community. That's not generally known."

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