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Wednesday, October 12, 2005

The Urban League Village is poised to become a reality

By [GORDY HOLT](#)
SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

Perhaps as soon as summer 2007, plywood covering the windows of Colman School will have been removed, and the old place will blossom.

At last.

Closed since 1985 and pointing toward its 100th birthday, it should, by then, be transformed into the Urban League Village at Colman School.

The Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle paid Seattle Public Schools \$804,000 for the property in 2003, bringing to a climax a long struggle to determine who should save the old building and turn it into something useful.

So here's the latest:

The building's two upper stories are to be divided into 36 affordable "work force" apartments, with its main floor chock-full of displays, artifacts and working spaces controlled by one of Seattle's newest institutions, the Northwest African American Museum.

When all this happens, a neighborhood eyesore will have been restored to what it had been on the day it opened as a neighborhood elementary school back in 1910, and it will be an especially poignant moment for the four who started it all: Earl Debnam, Michael Greenwood, Charlie James and Omari Tahir-Garrett.

On Nov. 25, 1985, the Colman Four broke in through a back window and for the next eight years more or less camped out there, voicing their dream that the building not be bulldozed or otherwise declared surplus by the school district, but turned somehow into an African American museum and cultural center.

After years of march-ins and sit-ins and talk-ins with everyone from the mayor on up, that dream is about to come true.

"Hopefully," the museum's director, Carver Gayton, said in a word. "But I'm confident we'll meet our target."

Urban League President and CEO James Kelly said this week that he also is confident. The project "has \$7 million

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secured and another \$7 million in the pipeline," he said. 

For drivers approaching the Mount Baker tunnel eastbound, the old school at South Massachusetts Street and 23rd Avenue South is a peripheral profile against the skyline to the southeast, its brick-red surfaces little changed in 20 years, its windows still shuttered by plywood painted red.

Physical progress also is visible. A chain-link fence surrounds the place, and heaps of fresh topsoil have been piled up in front where Seattle Parks and Recreation is spending nearly \$310,000 to turn the old school's parking lot into a city park.

There has been progress at the historical level, too. Neighbors who have had to live with and worry about the structure's deteriorating presence for so many years can now brag about the place as an official Seattle landmark. Its preservation was assured on Aug. 17 when the city's Landmarks Preservation Board approved the Urban League's application.

Gayton, a former educator at Seattle University and the University of Washington who will be 67 next week -- and whose African American roots in Seattle reach back five generations -- was named the museum's director late last year and took charge of the project in February.

"We're in what I call our fund-raising final phase," he said. "And I hope to have more to say about that in a couple of months. We've been working hard. There's a lot of community support, and we've been moving in the right direction."

Gayton said the renovation is scheduled to begin next spring with a grand opening set for the summer of 2007.

At DKA Architecture and Planning, Rico Quirindongo is shepherding the Urban League's master-use application through the city's permit process.

Quirindongo was completing his master's thesis at the UW when he sat down with the hopeful Colman Four 10 years ago.

"I'd been turned on to the idea of an African American museum and cultural center," he said. "So for about a year, I worked with those guys and a couple of other folks and with the city."

That effort would go for naught, however, and the dream would languish until Kelly and the Urban League stepped up.

Kelly brought clout and snapped the project to attention "without question," Quirindongo said.

"But, I would never want to take away from the efforts of those earliest people," he said. "Everybody in the community has been important in moving this project forward."

Barbara Thomas, 56, a protege of the late African American artist Jacob Lawrence, is in charge "of making sure there's something inside the box - that is," she said, "me, along with a community committee, of course."

The emerging vision is for an exhibit that describes the "middle passage," that second of three legs sailed by English slave ships that hauled human

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cargoes from Africa to the New World before returning to England for another round.

The Northwest African American Museum would expand on that theme, Thomas said. "What I want to think about, is how many ways African Americans have moved around this country and to the Northwest. ...

"That's the story we want to tell, the everyday story that involves people who still have roots here. We hope to be drawing source material from across the region -- from Oregon and Idaho and Vancouver, Canada, as well as Washington. We want to keep our sources wide and open.

"It's going to be exciting."

P-I reporter Gordy Holt can be reached at 206-448-8356 or gordyholt@seattlepi.com.

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