

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Seattle Griot Project Secures Permanent Home While Putting Exhibits In Virtual Reality

The former Sanctuary at Admiral in central Seattle will house the Washington State Black Legacy Institute.

By **Saundra Sorenson**
Of *The Skanner News*

A Black history-gathering project that began 20 years ago as an unrealized DVD series has evolved into the Washington State Black Legacy Institute, now housed in a stately 9,000-square-foot former church that will open to the public in two weeks.

Two years ago, the Seattle Griot Project shared with *The Skanner* a developing blueprint for cities looking to preserve local Black history, one neighborhood at a time. The project is named after a West African phrase for a community historian, one who acted as a “repository of oral tradition” through storytelling, poetry and music.

The approach is similarly multifaceted at 2656 42nd Avenue SW in West Seattle.

“We’ve strengthened our educational component infrastructure, we have purchased the building, so what we’re doing now is manicuring to make sure the landscape has the appeal and the perception of an institute more than kind of an overgrown home,” Roger Evans, developer and curator of the Washington State Black Legacy Institute, told *The Skanner*. “We’re trying to adopt an appeal that will command a perception that this is a place for education, inspiration and preservation.”

A walkthrough of the facility showcases how the both homey and spacious old church is an ideal setting for exhibits and community events, with a large kitchen, stage and gathering areas, as well as classrooms. But while the physical space is impressive, equally so are the Seattle Griot’s plans for the virtual space.

“We’re taking all those components you’d see organically (in the museum), digitizing them, staging them and putting

them into a simulation so that if you put on a (VR) headset, you’re able to experience them at least optically like you would if you were walking into the space,” Evans, a long-time multimedia educator, said. “That virtual museum will reflect the components that we have of our physical museum for people who are not able to come into these spaces. We’re trying to make this more a global effort than a regional ef-

“This is a place for education, inspiration and preservation

fort where you have to be in the Pacific Northwest to be immersed in the Black legacy.”

That effort changes how off-site visitors can interact with artifacts and scanned documents. But the institute is also making recorded conversations more dynamic through what are called “encapsulated interviews.”

“What we do is we put a 360-degree camera in the center of an interview, so you get the interviewer’s view of both the people being interviewed and the interviewer and the production around you – it’s like being stuck in the matrix,” Evans said. “If you put the headset on, everywhere you turn your head, you see the production going. The idea was to turn it into almost the truest perception of a court. You don’t get to ask questions, but you’re in the middle of the jury. You get to see witnesses, you get to see evidence – all of this stuff is interactive in this space.”

Visitors can approach the wealth of resources by accessing curriculum-like modules, which include themes like

Black churches and the Black Masonic order.

“Our interviews have an added component to help the virtual reality perception even more,” Evans said. “They can watch these interviews two or three times and learn something new every time because the 360-degree perception makes you feel like you’re really visiting that space. Embedded in these encapsulated videos are references that will take you to websites, background on the people who are doing the interviews, the people who are interviewed...These are going to be components to tell a richer story, and the discovery work is going to be on the person who wears the headset or goes on the

website.”

The organization is working with the virtual education resource center Black Muse to realize its multimedia goals.

“For us, Black people are visual folks,” Evans said. “We learn more by experience than anything else. This gives us the opportunity to sit up and literally share it with people instead of drilling it into their heads or making it mandatory. Now, they can just sit and absorb the experience as it goes across them.”

So far, the institute has recorded five interviews with this kind of technology, documenting conversations with Dexter Gordon, executive vice president of Evergreen State College, and the Rev. Leslie Braxton of

New Beginnings Christian Fellowship, among others.

The institute is working with the Living Arts Cultural Heritage Project on Bainbridge Island and the Black Heritage Society of Seattle as it develops its offerings, and has welcomed a team of student interns from Gibson Ek High School in Issaquah, Washington.

One of the exhibits in February will honor the African-American Museum, a predecessor of sorts that closed in 2005 and serves as both an inspiration and a case study for the institute.

“Jackie O’ Bannon spearheaded that thing when she started an organization in 1993,” Evans said. “She went to college to get this kind

of experience and then she put it into action, and then in ‘95 her and a family member of mine, Ethel Craven-Sweet, put the concept together to have this museum.

“They had this museum for a total of 10 years, and then it got dispersed. That was one of the reasons why we sat down and had a meeting with Dr. Gordon, because he was one of the people on the board at the time, and we wanted to get the perspective on how that restoration could possibly happen, and what were the pitfalls so we could avoid such an event if it ever happened again.”

Now, Evans said, the institute will become the model for what an interactive and immersive Black history museum and archive can be.

“We’ve taken influence from what has happened before and failed, and tried to redesign around the failure to create a success agenda,” he said.

One new development: The very technology that can create these kinds of museum spaces is also driving interest in such stories.

“God bless the internet itself,” Seattle Griot co-founder Clyde Merriwether told *The Skanner*. “Before that, our history didn’t exist at all. Now it’s out there enough to where the curiosity is showing up.”

The Washington State Black Legacy Institute will formally open with a ribbon-cutting on Feb. 1, 11 a.m., at 2656 42nd Ave. SW, Seattle. This kicks off the month-long Black Legacy Exhibit. For more information, visit <https://www.theseattlegriotproject.com>.



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The Rev. Bernice King Speaks

The Rev. Bernice King, CEO of the King Center in Atlanta, spoke Tuesday as she kicked off a series of events – summits, service projects and educational opportunities – leading up to Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Jan. 20. Coretta Scott King founded the King Center in 1968 to memorialize her husband’s life, work, legacy and commitment to nonviolence. As she outlined the plans for the King holiday observance and talked about the King Center’s future, Bernice King reflected on violence and hardship in the world. She also spoke about the upcoming presidential inauguration of Donald Trump – which falls on the MLK holiday – and on the legacy of President Jimmy Carter.



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