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## Race to Update Dora Nelson Museum before Reception



Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough with Katie Keyes and Midgie Parker, members of the Perris Valley Historical and Museum Association stand behind Alberta Mable Kearney, 95, founder of the Dora Nelson African-American Art and History Museum in Perris.

Despite its modest space, lack of professional staff and funding and no public visiting hours, the Dora Nelson African American Art and History Museum plays a vital role in promoting and preserving the culture and values of several ethnic groups in the Perris Valley.

The Nelson museum on Seventh Street in Perris is one only a handful of locations on the West Coast to house artifacts chronicling the legacy and influence of African-Americans.

When the Association of African-American Museums holds its 2016 conference in Riverside—the first time ever in California—the Dora Nelson museum will act as host and will serve as one of the stops convention delegate will visit.

Perris officials have been invited to a reception the Nelson museum will be hosting during the Aug. 3-6 conference.

A fundraiser to support the Nelson museum took place May 15 at the Center for Social Justice and Civil Liberties in Riverside. The center currently is hosting an exhibit titled “Women Game Changers, Less Known, Celebrated Here,” featuring the stories of 70 difference makers in the fields of science, law, the military, entertainment and education. Among those featured is Alberta Mable Kearney, founder of the Dora Nelson museum.

Kearney, 95, was on hand during the fundraiser.

Her daughter, Lovella Singer, carries on her legacy and serves as the museum’s executive director and liaison to the community at large. Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough attended the fundraiser on behalf of the City.

Charles Bibbs, a Riverside artist who works in paint, lithography and other mediums, praised the Dora Nelson Museum and the City of Perris for their parts in preserving ethnic art and culture.

“What they are trying to do in Perris is a really big thing,” Bibbs told the fundraiser audience. “There are not more than eight or 10 museums on the West Coast dedicated to African-American art and history. Art is the sounding board—we tell history and culture through art. A small community like Perris with a museum like the Dora Nelson museum is just as important as Washington D.C. or Los Angeles. Perris is a little City with a big heart.”



M.J. Abraham, director of the Center for Social Justice and Civil Liberties in Riverside, with Alberta Mable Kearney and Lovella Singer, Kearney's daughter and executive director of the Dora Nelson African-American Art and History Museum.

### Created from disappointment

Former slave Dora Nelson moved to Perris from Indiana and in 1924, established the First Baptist Church, the City’s original African-American congregation at Seventh and F Streets. Little else is known about Nelson, who died in 1930.

Alberta Kearney purchased the church dilapidated and abandoned building for \$25 from the City of Perris, which was set to demolish it. She purchased the site for its Victorian-era doors and later supervised the demolition of the building, not discovering until later that the building held significant meaning for the City’s African-American community.

Disheartened, Kearney began a lifelong pursuit to collect artifacts that told its story. She purchased the steamer trunk once owned by Nelson for \$3 and also obtained a blue-and-white dresser owned by Nelson.

Other artifacts include a copy of an 1833 slave auction, a collection of shoes from local to national figures who made a difference in race relations and a painting of Kearney by artist Karl Marshall depicting her sitting in the museum. Tours to the museum at 316 East Seventh Street are available upon request.

Singer, in remarks made at the fundraiser, said she sometimes thought of abandoning the effort to make the Nelson museum a world-class facility. But the thought disappointing Kearney drove her to continue.

“Her perseverance inspired me,” Singer said.



The Dora Nelson African-American Art and History Museum is located in this modest residence on East Seventh Street in Perris.

### Ongoing upgrades

Some improvements have taken place in recent months. A new roof was installed thanks to a \$10,000 grant from Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley, Councilman Yarbrough, part of the team of volunteers that is working on the museum’s facelift, said other improvements are in the works.

Those include installing a new fence, repairing water damage to interior walls and the ceiling, installing a new floor and interior painting.

“This museum is very unique and we want to make sure people enjoy it as Mrs. Kearney envisioned,” Yarbrough said. “Our City is committed to its culture and this museum contributes to that culture. If we don’t know where our roots are, we can’t know where we’re going.”

He remains optimistic improvements can be completed by the time the dignitaries arrive this summer.

“This project is close to our heart,” he said. “The museum needs a facelift and I am confident we will get it done.”



Workers remove a damaged roof prior to replacing it at the Dora Nelson African-American Art and History Museum.

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