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Dignitaries Admire Revamped Dora Nelson Museum



Perris Mayor Daryl Busch discusses improvements at the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum with project manager Dawn Fiscus.

Dignitaries from the Association of African-American Museums paid a visit to Perris Wednesday (August 3) to take in the improvements at a City museum named for a slave and founded by a modest woman committed to preserving the community's past.

The 55 visitors saw recent improvements to the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum on Seventh Street in Downtown Perris, renovations made possible through efforts from the City of Perris and numerous volunteers. Those upgrades include a new roof, exterior painting, interior walls, floors, fencing and landscaping.

The out-of-towners were impressed. Very impressed.

"I saw all the hard work and I was moved to tears," said Auntaneshia Staveloz, a Washington D.C. resident and vice-president of the Association of African-American Museums. "This is a community that uplifts its people when they are down. Their real work made a real impact."

Staveloz said other small museums could use the Perris model to bring about renovations and raise their profile. Association president Sam Black, a Pittsburgh resident, said the Nelson museum, the only African-American art museum in the Inland, looks "1,000 percent better" than when he visited several months ago. Black said one of the missions of the Association is to advocate on behalf of small museums, to instruct them how to archive and display historical materials and impart knowledge about professional museum standards.

Although not a high-profile museum, the Nelson museum serves a vital purpose.

"Museums exist to preserve human history, human endeavor," Black said. "This museum is a learning center for school kids and adults. In that sense, the work done here is extremely important."



Framed by the Victorian-era doors taken from the City's first African-American church, Perris City Engineer Habib Motlagh and local historian Katie Keyes discuss the improvements to the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum, which include a new roof, flooring, paint, fencing and landscaping.

The Association of African-American Museums is holding its annual convention in Riverside, the first time in 30 years it has met on the West Coast.

When Dora Nelson museum founder Alberta Mable Kearney and her daughter, Lovella Singer, received advanced notice of the visit about three years ago, they hoped to spruce up the humble building, but lacked funding and expertise.

The City of Perris stepped in to help.

City Engineer Habib Motlagh made available one his employees, Dawn Fiscus, who served as project manager for the museum. Riverside County Supervisor Marion Ashley contributed \$10,000 for a new roof. Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough donated many hours working on the museum, completing tasks from sanding and painting the exterior fencing to power-washing the exterior.

Volunteers from local churches, Boy Scout troops and other Perris museums pitched in. Many agreed that the Nelson museum at 316 Seventh Street had never looked better than when the bus carrying the out-of-town dignitaries rolled up at twilight Wednesday.



Perris City Councilman Mark Yarbrough says hello to Alberta Mable Kearney, 95, the visionary and founder of the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum.

Created from sadness

The Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum is named after a freed slave born in Georgia who moved to Indiana before finally settling in Perris with her family. A devoutly religious woman, Nelson started the First Baptist Church, the City's first African-American congregation, at Seventh and F Streets. Little else is known about Nelson, who died about 1930.

Enter Alberta Mable Kearney, a mother of 11 with a love of antiques.

She purchased the former church building, which was abandoned and in disrepair. In 1964, she supervised its demolition without realizing the historical significance. Disheartened at the loss of a historical site, Kearney became determined to collect memorabilia highlighting the African-American experience in the Perris Valley.

Kearney salvaged the Victorian-era doors from the First Baptist Church and later acquired the steamer trunk and a blue-and-white dresser owned by Nelson. She also obtained a copy of an 1833 flyer announcing a slave auction and shoes from local to national leaders who advanced race relations. Other artifacts in the museum include a portrait of Kearney painted by artist Karl Marshall. When she wasn't building the museum, Kearney worked with longtime Perris educator Nan Sanders to mentor hundreds of students and young adults.

Kearney, 95, suffered a stroke in May and is rehabilitating. She appeared at this week's visit, smiling often during the musical interlude and remarks from local and national dignitaries.



Perris City Councilwoman Tonya Burke visits with resident Arlene Jackson during an August 3 reception at the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum, which welcomed dignitaries from the Association of African-American Museums in Washington D.C.

City leaders laud improvements

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch, Mayor Pro Tem Rita Rogers and City Councilmembers Tonya Burke, David Starr Rabb and Mark Yarbrough attended Wednesday's festivities. Perris City Manager Richard Belmudez and Michael McDermott, chief operating officer of the Perris Community Economic Development Corporation, also attended the August 3 reception.

Busch told the East Coast visitors "the City of Perris is proud to support your convention and pleased that you are here tonight."

"We're glad you are here to see the renovations at the Nelson museum," he said. "A lot of work has gone into those improvements. We're glad you're here. We'd love to see you come back."

Rogers called the reception a "wonderful event that put Perris in the best light."

"I appreciate all the efforts of the volunteers who worked so diligently to renovate the Dora Nelson museum," Rogers said.

Burke said the visit from the Association of African-American Museums "skyrockets the profile of our Dora Nelson museum."

"The history of the Nelson museum is deeply entrenched in the City of Perris," she said. "Now we are a part of the history of the Association of African-American Museums."

Rabb said Perris has long ties to the African American community, noting that the City was founded about 1886 and incorporated in 1911. African Americans have called Perris home for most of that history.

"It is beautiful to see the renovations of the museum," he said. "They've come together quite nicely. It's important to remember and celebrate our history."

Yarbrough said he was very pleased the City followed through on its commitment to renovate the Nelson museum. "Without a knowledge of their past, many people find it difficult to know where they are going and become lost souls," Yarbrough said. "With the renovations at the Nelson museum completed, people will come from all over the U.S. to see it. It will be known throughout the U.S."



Perris City Councilman David Starr Rabb and Mayor Pro Tem Rita Rogers comment that recent improvements raise the stature and profile of the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum.

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