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Award Renamed to Honor Alberta Mable Kearney

For nearly 60 years, Perris resident Alberta Mable Kearney worked to improve the lives of City residents by mentoring students, supporting community organizations and through her life's passion—collecting African-American artifacts from the Perris Valley.

Kearney, who picked cotton as migrant laborer in her youth, started the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum to honor the former slave-turned-Perris-church founder.

Kearney realized one of her greatest dreams in September when delegates from the Association of African-American Museums visited the Nelson museum in Downtown Perris, praising her and the City for refurbishing the Nelson site on East Seventh Street.

Weeks later, Kearney died at the age of 95.

To honor her lifetime of work, the Perris City Council in October renamed the "Citizen of the Year Award" to the "Alberta Mable Kearney" Award beginning in 2017.

Elected representatives praised Kearney for her decades of commitment to Perris and its residents, her lifelong work to bring various ethnic communities together and her passion for preserving history.



Alberta Mable Kearney, founder of the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum, at a fundraiser in May with her daughter, museum executive director Lovella Singer.

Well-deserved honor

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch said changing the award to honor Kearney is "well deserved considering her long and rich history in our City."

"Mrs. Kearney was an important and active member of our community who worked tirelessly to bring the Dora Nelson museum to Perris," Busch said. "She was a great asset to Perris and recognizing her by renaming our Citizen of the Year Award in her memory is only fitting. It is well supported by the City Council."

Mayor Pro Tem Rita Rogers recommended the change to her colleagues at a previous meeting. She called Kearney "a legend for decades in the City." At Kearney's memorial service, Rogers said she was moved by the large number of testimonials from residents who praised Kearney for changing their lives in a positive manner.

Naming the Citizen of the Year recipient in Kearney's name creates "an eternal memory in our hearts," Rogers said.

"She lives in our hearts forever," Rogers said.

City Councilwoman Tonya Burke called Kearney "a pillar of our community for a very long time, a game-changer, a motivator and someone who brought people together."

"She truly was a mother to many," Burke said. "I am so glad the City was able to help get the Nelson museum renovated so Mother Kearney could get the recognition she so richly deserves."

City Councilman David Starr Rabb said Kearney's efforts to start and maintain the Nelson museum represent one of the first and only African-American museums on the West Coast. Rabb said Kearney became known throughout Perris for mentoring children of all races and giving them a knowledge of the history of the Perris Valley.

"She was a very valuable resident of Perris," Rabb said. "Changing the Citizen of the Year Award honors her legacy, cements her legacy in Perris."

City Councilman Mark Yarbrough donated many hours of his time rehabbing the Nelson Museum in the months prior to the visit from Washington dignitaries. Improvements included a new roof, flooring, walls, landscaping, interior and exterior painting, signage and landscaping. Yarbrough said he considered the work a labor of love.

"People like Mrs. Kearney are the ones we need to remember," Yarbrough said. "She gave from the heart. She cared."



The Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum received major upgrades from volunteers and the City of Perris.

Smiling down

Kearney's daughter, Lovella Singer, serves as executive director of the Dora Nelson museum. Told of the City's decision to rename the Citizen of the Year Award in her mother's memory, Singer said she was "thrilled, delighted and honored."

"I know mother is smiling down from heaven," Singer said. "I am so pleased that the City of Perris has preserved the memory of a citizen who lived in this community most of her life and who cared deeply about it. This is a real honor."

Humble beginnings, monumental legacy

Alberta Mable Kearney was born in Benchley, Texas, in 1920 and worked as a migrant laborer, picking cotton and other crops. She graduated as valedictorian of her class in 1939, moved to Los Angeles, and later married Charles W. Kearney. Alberta Kearney gave birth to 11 children—eight sons and three daughters. They moved to the Perris Valley in 1957, settling in the Good Hope area west of the City.

Her contributions to the region were many, varied and impactful.

She encouraged Perris school trustees to inaugurate a Head Start program in the City and worked with educational authorities to obtain more federal funding and provide equal opportunities for all students.

She helped organize the Perris Valley Human Relations Council in 1972 and later went out of her way to welcome Vietnamese refugees fleeing communism to Perris in 1975.



The doors of the original African-American congregation in Perris, founded by former slave Dora Nelson in 1924, are displayed at the museum which bears her name, founded by Perris resident Alberta Mable Kearney.

But it was a tragic mistake that led Kearney to conceive and bring to reality the Dora Nelson African-American Art & History Museum at 316 East Seventh Street. Kearney bought the property and demolished a dilapidated building on the site without realizing it once housed the First Baptist Church, the City's first African-American congregation started by Nelson in 1924. The former slave, born in Georgia, had moved to Perris after living in Indiana. Nelson died several years after starting the congregation and little else is known about her life.

The loss of the historic building ignited a passion in Kearney to begin collecting artifacts documenting the African-American experience, both locally and nationally.

Among the artifacts were Victorian screen doors from the original First Baptist Church, a dresser and steamer trunk owned by Nelson, copies of slave documents including an auction notice from 1833 and a collection of shoes from people who worked to improve race relations.

The museum opened in 1997 and achieved its greatest accolade this summer, when more than 50 dignitaries from Washington D.C. and elsewhere paid a visit to the Nelson museum during the 38th annual conference of the Association of African-American Museum.

The visit marked the first time a West Coast museum has ever served as host for the conference.

Media Contact

Joe Vargo
Public Information Officer
951-943-6100
jvargo@cityofperris.org



Perris City Hall
101 N. D Street
Perris, CA 92570

Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8 am - 6pm

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