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Historical Association's exhibit helps document Syracuse's rich black history

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By Dick Case / Post-Standard columnist



Submitted photo

Photo of Ike Harrison, executive director of Dunbar Center, working with students, is part of the Onondaga Historical Association's Community Collections exhibit.

Syracuse, NY -- As we step into Black History Month, the Onondaga Historical Association is ready with an exhibit tied to the Black History Preservation Project.

The show opens Wednesday at the OHA Museum at 321 Montgomery St. and continues until April 30.

It's called "Community Collections."

That's an apt description, because the material on display on the second floor of the museum is drawn from Syracuse's neighborhoods: photographs, documents and oral histories out of the community. The materials are to serve as a data base for the project's long-term goal of a virtual museum, according to Gregg Tripoli, executive director of the OHA.

Gregg said the black history materials are part of a larger project by OHA and its partners to document "the entire history of the community," all neighborhoods and groups. One particular area that has been neglected so far, he explained, are gay, lesbian and transgender residents.

Materials in "Community Collections" of about 60 items range from a copy of the acceptance letter received by Marjorie Carter, Syracuse's first black school district teacher, in 1950, to photographs of Clarence "Junie" Dunham, a former county legislator, on the job at Western Electric, back in 1967, and members of the Renwick Juniors basketball team at the downtown Boys Club on Genesee Street 1947-48.

The pictures and other documents were collected at a "digitization fair" held in November at Beauchamp Library, which houses a library of black history books and photographs from the neighborhood. The preservation project has been compiling oral histories from the black community. Excerpts from this trove will be part of the exhibit.

There will be a guest book as part of the show to allow visitors to give the OHA information about the photographs, some of which are not identified.

The Black History Preservation Project is a community-wide program involving the historical association, the Syracuse University Southside Initiative, the SU African American Studies Department, Dunbar Center and city government. Curators of the free exhibit are Claire Enkosky and Deborah Spector, who are interns at OHA. It is sponsored by the African American Studies Department's "Black Syracuse: a community history and mapping project."

The history project collaborated on a recent film, "The 15th Ward and Beyond," which consists of highlights of a bus tour of the neighborhood. The film is not part of the exhibit.

Richard Breland's pictures

"Black Syracuse and Beyond," selections from the photographic collection of Syracusan Richard Breland, is on display through March 3 at Schine Student Center, University Place, Syracuse University. The show, in the second-floor Panasci Lounge, is open to the public during the center's normal hours, 7:30 a.m. through midnight.

Breland's photographs date to the 1940s and offer a glimpse into the historical record of Syracuse's 15th ward.

A cry for help

This is an e-mail I got labeled "our train statues: Dear Dick Case, Please put back our train statues. I miss them." Jon Goode.

Dear John: I don't control Duke Epolito's plaster figures, which used to stand on the abandoned New York Central railroad platform, along the westbound lane of I-690. The statues were removed Dec. 11 by Synapse Sustainability Trust, which says this is part of a renovation of the platform.

The figures have been there since 1982. The folks to appeal to are Synapse, at 475-3700. They rent part of the old Railway Express Building, where the statues stood. Eckhardt "Chris" Beck, managing partner of Synapse, said the non-profit trust will try to raise money in the community to cover renovation.

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