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African American Museum seeks to expand hours with fundraising gala

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com 23 hrs ago



Older African Americans share their stories Saturday, July 22, 2017, during a storytelling event at the African American Museum. (Bac Totrong/photo@bgdailynews.com)

Bac Totrong/Daily News

When Maxine Ray remembers Jonesville, a historically black community that once thrived where part of Western Kentucky University now stands, she imagines a neighborhood where folks looked out for one another.

“It was a good place to live. It was a tight-knit community,” Ray said, describing the community as a place where children played freely and African-Americans ran prosperous businesses.

Now, decades after residents were forced out of the community as WKU expanded, Ray is working to share the history of Jonesville through The Bowling Green African American Museum, which is hosting an upcoming fundraising gala.

The gala will be at 6 p.m. Sept. 22 at WKU’s Knicely Conference Center. Tickets are \$50 per person, and the museum requests guests RSVP by calling 270-745-5753 or email aambgawbuford@gmail.com.

The gala’s organizers hope to make it an annual event to offer updates on the museum and raise money for educational programs. This year’s gala will feature a bluegrass jazz quartet, a silent auction and refreshments including a cash bar. Guests are asked to dress in semi-formal attire.

Proceeds from the gala will allow the museum to offer more regular hours. The museum is currently open a few days a week.

Howard Bailey, who serves on the museum’s board of trustees with Ray, said the museum would like to hire WKU graduate students to act as tour guides. That would enable the museum to work with Warren County Public Schools and the Bowling Green Independent School District for school field trips, he said.

“We want to work with the school system and be an asset to all children,” he said, adding students don’t often get African-American history during their regular classes.

That history includes Jonesville and the Shake Rag community, which were some of the few areas African-Americans could live in, along with Bartown and Delafield, during segregation.

Bailey, a retired WKU administrator, also remembers Jonesville. In 1966, when he was attending WKU as a freshman, the first church he went to in Bowling Green was in Jonesville.



Located in the Erskine House at 1783 Chestnut St. near WKU, the museum is home to several artifacts that illustrate the history of the local African-American community. A military exhibit features African-American veterans as far back as World War I, including the uniform of a local Tuskegee airman.

Other artifacts include a washboard and other cleaning items that an African-American woman used to wash laundry for a prominent white family.

While many African-Americans relied on white families for their livelihood, others owned restaurants and hotels, taught in segregated schools and a few even worked as physicians, which Bailey described as unusual in Kentucky.

For students taking a tour of the museum, it would give “an understanding of the remarkable changes that have occurred in Bowling Green and the nation as a whole in terms of race,” Bailey said.

John Hardin, a retired WKU history professor who chairs the museum’s board of trustees, said the accomplishments of local African-Americans helped make Bowling Green what it is today.

“Being African-American in Bowling Green was more than simply being workers, they were contributors,” he said.

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