

Politics in the Museum

Association of African American Museums
2009 Annual Meeting, Baton Rouge

Presented by

Beverly Robertson, President

National Civil Rights Museum

Joy Bailey, Senior Consultant

Lord Cultural Resources



Creating Cultural Capital

Rights and Responsibilities

at the

National Civil Rights Museum
Memphis, Tennessee

Museums are Morphing

“Museums are morphing. Once they were chroniclers or collectors, gathering objects and facts and putting them on display. Now many have become crucibles: places where a cultural identity is hammered out, refined, and reshaped. Along the way they also have become community centers, where a group gathers to celebrate its past, commemorate its tragedies and convey its achievements to others”

National Civil Rights Museum (NCRM)
Mission Statement

The National Civil Rights Museum, located at the Lorraine Motel, the assassination site of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., chronicles key episodes of the American civil rights movement and the legacy of this movement to inspire participation in civil and human rights efforts globally, through our collections, exhibitions, and educational programs.

NCRM Background

- **1982 – Lorraine Hotel foreclosed**
- **Lorraine Civil Rights Museum Foundation (Save the Lorraine)**
- **Key Leaders:**
 - **Chuck Scruggs, Gen. Mgr., WDIA Radio**
 - **D'Army Bailey, local judge**
- **1982 – Hotel bought out of foreclosure for \$144,000**
- **1983 – Fundraising campaign commenced**
- **1987 – Museum groundbreaking**
- **1991 – Museum opened**

Inaugural Board of Directors

- **Diverse**
- **66% African American; 34% Caucasian**
- **Contentious; conflicts between board members**

Source of Initial Contention

- **Power Struggles**
- **Singular, autonomous power grab by one vs. broad-based decision making governance of many**
- **Meetings were explosive**
- **Characterized by vilification and name calling**
- **17-year street protest by Jackie Smith**

Source of Initial Contention (cont.)

“They knew things were happening...but they didn’t have any grip on them. All they could do is keep the pressure on me to open up and put them into the process. I was not willing to do that!”

(Memphis Business Journal, April, 2004)

“I would conduct a one-man filibuster to keep them from voting if necessary.”

(Memphis Business Journal, April, 2004)

Initial Funding

- **\$8.8 million**
 - **\$4.4 million (50%) State of TN (bond issued)**
 - **\$2.2 million (25%) City Government**
 - **\$2.2 million (25%) County Government**

Role/State of Tennessee

- **Museum operates under lease agreement with the State of TN**
- **Lease renewed every 7-8 years**
- **1998 lease renewal provision**
 - **Foundation Board to acquire Museum for \$1 upon retirement of debt, March, 2007**
- **State maintains oversight**
 - **collections/building ownership**
 - **visits**
 - **Audits**

The Perfect Political Storm

February, 2007

- **Founder lobbies State to maintain lease**
- **Board expresses desire to explore purchase option**

Initial Museum Strategy

- **Meetings with State Legislators**
 - **Capitol/Nashville**
 - **Memphis**
- **Memphis meeting terminated without community input**

Community Involvement

- **Community drawn into fray with volatile public relations campaign**
 - **“Whites want to buy the Museum for \$1”**
 - **“Corporations taking over Museum”**
 - **“Taking our history”**
- **Media blitzes, radio, television, public meetings, marches, etc.**

Museum's racial makeup stirs up controversy

Power struggle

Ben Greenberg's Weblog

[Liberate Civil Rights Museum from Corporate Control](#)
[View comments](#)

By John Gibson

Arkansas Delta Truth and Justice

THE
Nation.

Thieves of Black History

beneath the radar

By

[Gary Younge](#)

[This article appeared in the November 12,
2007 edition of *The Nation*.](#)

14

October 25, 2007

COMMERCIAL APPEAL
MEMPHIS, TN
AUG 21 2007

Public critical of privatizing Rights museum

WALLA WALLA UNION-BULLETIN

Date: Friday, November 02 2007
Location: WALLA WALLA, WA
Circulation(DMA)): 14,541 (125)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (D)
Page: A5
Keyword: National Civil Rights Museum

PORTLAND PRESS-HERALD (FINAL)
**Civil Rights Museum board
draws criticism**

Civil rights museum board's racial makeup an issue in Memphis

AMARILLO GLOBE-NEWS

Civil rights museum's board criticized for racial makeup

On-Going Museum Strategy

- **Presentations at community strategy sessions**
- **Editorials in newspapers**
- **Interviews on television**

Morphing of Issues

- **Primary Issue: Lease vs. Purchase Option**
- **Diversity of Board (more community vs. corporate involvement)**
- **Physical condition of Museum/ongoing maintenance**
- **Transparency of Operations**
- **Increased community oversight**

Addressing Contentious Issues

- **Attempt to mitigate issues through proactive initiatives**
- **When avoidance is impossible, act**
- **Actions must be immediate, objective and professionally delivered**

Mitigate

- **Conduct meetings**

- **Group/groups involved**
- **Elected officials**
- **General public**

- **Create a well-defined media strategy**

- **Newspaper editorials**
- **Letters to the Editor**
- **Media blitzes**

- **Marshal strength of advocacy groups**

- **Actions should be immediate, objective and professionally delivered**
 - **Communicate openly & honestly**
 - **Exhibit transparency of operation and information**
 - **Borrow credibility from respected stakeholders**
 - **Address concerns publicly**
 - **Define strategic actions taken**
 - **Present the other side**
 - **Make the community your partner**

Marshal Strength of Advocates

❖ **Museum members**

❖ **Volunteers**

❖ **Community of Faith**

❖ **Similarly missioned organizations**

❖ **Founders**

The Resolution

- **Board pursues long term lease agreement**
- **Developed Memorandum of Understanding w/ State of Tennessee**

Do's and Taboos of Ethical Leadership

- **Do's**

- **Clearly define the message**
- **Develop a fact sheet**
- **Create a strategy for addressing issues**
- **Simplify/deconstruct complicated issues**
- **Exhibit transparency in all actions**
- **Address issues rather than personalities**

- **Taboos...Avoid**

- **Veiled or cryptic comments or insinuations**
- **Contentious and emotional public displays**
- **The appearance of covert or hidden agendas**
- **Being dismissive**
- **Writing “poison pen” letters**
- **Undisclosed or self-serving agendas**
- **Hiding and avoiding all issues**

Learning

- **What appeared to be a bane became a benefit**
 - **Result: Increased visibility and financial support**
- **Ignoring does not make the problem disappear**
- **Issues are dynamic; they change quickly**
- **“One can build a mountain from a mole hill”**
- **Open, honest dialogue and transparency are extremely important**
- **Community awareness & accountability is tantamount**
 - **Ensure an on-going reality check**
 - **Community is solidly vested**

Matching Your Museums Mission to Your Constituency Needs

at the

Albany Civil Rights Institute
Albany, Georgia

A community's greatest asset is its people.

--Dr. Emory Campbell

Former Executive Penn Center, S.C.

The soul of the community is the people.

Linda Sootsman

Planner, City of Albany

Albany, Georgia*

Population: 76,939 (proper), 164,000 (6 –county metro area)

Median resident age: 31 years

Ethnic Composition:

Black 65%

White Non-Hispanic 33%

Other 1%

Education:

High school or higher: 27%

Bachelor's degree or higher: 12%

Graduate or professional degree: 6%

27% of the population lives below the poverty line

**2007 U.S. Census Statistics*

Albany Civil Rights Institute

- 1961 A coalition of people and organizations form the Albany Movement in Albany, Georgia.
- 1961-1963 The most concentrated years of the Albany Movement's civil and human rights activities
- 1993 Albany Civil Rights Monument is dedicated in Harlem Square, Albany
- 1994 Tropical storm Alberto devastates Albany and Mt Zion Baptist Church gifts its 1906 building to the Albany Civil Rights Movement Museum at Old Mt Zion
- 1998 Albany Civil Rights Movement Museum at Old Mt Zion with city, county, and church funds
- 2007 Albany Tomorrow, Inc. breaks ground on an expansion of the newly renamed Albany Civil Rights Institute



In the Beginning

Because it was started as an impetus for tourism growth;

- The first institution had trouble connecting with the residents of Albany
- Museum creators did not fully understand the story, and
- The agenda was to have a building but not to tell a story



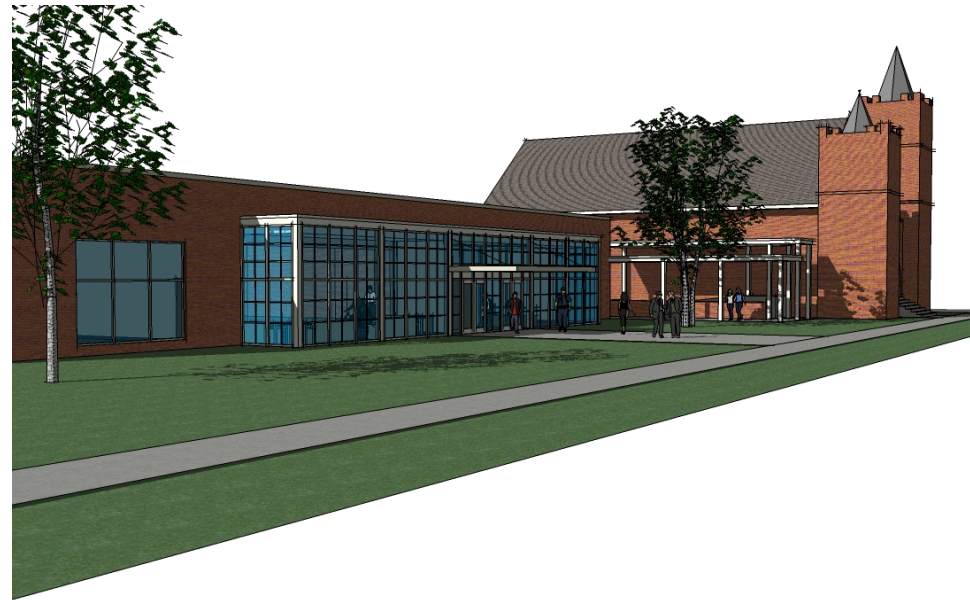
The Great Opportunity

In 2007, SPLOST Money provided opportunity to expand, adding;

- 12,000 square foot dedicated museum building
- Exhibitions
- Freedom Garden
- Office
- Rental and Storage space

Grant money provided

- Collection of Oral Histories
- Program staff



The Conflict

The Albany conflict was internal:

Making sure that the “full” story was told

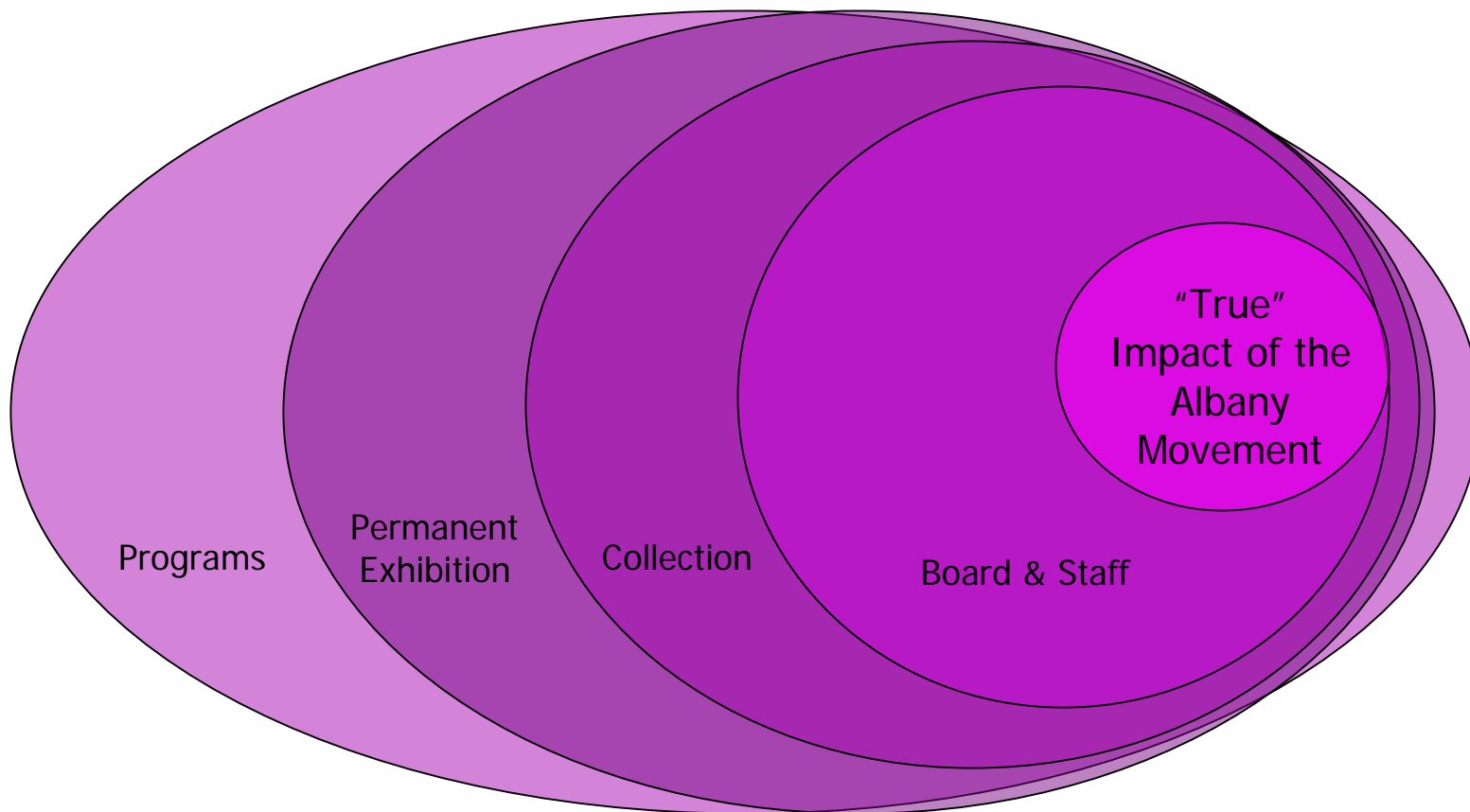
Versus

Guarding the story so that a particular is not diminished

In the new exhibition, people were afraid;

- The museum would privilege the “everyday story” over the extraordinary stories, or
- The museum was not interested in telling “the truth”

Growth of the Albany Civil Rights Institute



Reconciling the Movement

Built a committee that would ensure that the new institution told an “even” story

Solicited input and participation from;

- Respected Movement Leaders (Berniece Johnson Reagon, Annette Jones White, Charles Sherrod)
- Children of the Albany Movement --Made the story edgier, newer and more complete
- Future generations that had studied multiple aspects of the story

Our Task

The story of the Albany Movement had;

- Always been told by visiting scholars
- Never been told by everyday residents
- Never been celebrated as a 'Peoples Movement'



With the opening of the Expansion, there was an opportunity to;

- Listen, Listen, Listen
- Respond, Respond, Respond
 - Schedule monthly open meetings with widely disseminated After Action Reports
 - Constantly invite the public into the process-- created 3 advisory panels
 1. People of the Movement
 2. Youth
 3. Educators

Our Results: Beginning Anew

1. Segregation in South Georgia was a pervasive standard that ruled every aspect of life for its residents, Black, White, and other races and people of all ages.
2. Through commitment, persistence, and resilience of the Albany Movement, the citizens of Southwest Georgia continued the fight for equal justice and equal treatment before, during and after the arrival and departure of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
3. The leaders of the Albany Movement and leading participants were all young people that were convinced that they could make changes in their world and did.

Mission: To commemorate the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in Albany and Southwest Georgia so that it serves as an educational resource for the community, the nation, and the world.

Our Results: Practical

- Institution was opened with wide-ranging community support
- Increased community support
 - Membership programs catering to community interest
 - Participation in Public Programs
- Increased buy-in from politicians and funders
- Forged integral collaborations with Albany State University
 - Oral History collection
 - Technology and Marketing support
 - In process: established civil rights curriculum

*Most important: We captured the everyday stories of the Albany Movement participants and **included them in the new exhibitions.***