

Memories of 'Protest Years' Featured in New Exhibition

Anacostia Community Museum Showcases Formation of 'Chocolate City'

D. Kevin McNeir | 12/16/2015, 3 p.m.



The Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum held the opening of its newest exhibit, "Twelve Years That Shook And Shaped Washington," on Dec. 13, showcasing photos and memorabilia from 1963 to 1975. COREY PARRISH

A dynamic new exhibition, "Twelve Years That Shook and Shaped Washington: 1963-1975," opened Sunday, Dec. 13 at the Smithsonian's Anacostia Community Museum in Southeast, providing an inside view of the District during a tumultuous period in the city's history, chronicling how the foundation for today's Washington was laid during those transformative years leading up to the establishment of limited home rule.

The exhibition remains at the Southeast venue through Oct. 23, 2016.

Camille Akeju, museum director, said the exhibition continues the work of documenting urban communities – a key objective of the museum.

"Looking back at the rapidly changing racial, political, cultural and built landscapes from that period in history and the resulting impact will hopefully provide guidance to Washingtonians as we find our city once again amid radical change," Akeju said.

The exhibition features a timeline of key local milestones punctuated with several events of national importance. Six sections explore the local arts, music, theater and media scene; urban renewal efforts; emerging higher education institutions; and the expanding struggles for the rights of Blacks, Latinos, women, gays, the poor and D.C. residents for self-governance, juxtaposed against the backdrop of the anti-war protests and President Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society" policies.

"Twelve Years" also includes historical images and 22 pieces of audio/visual material including interviews and autobiographical stories with current and former Washingtonians.

The museum's longtime and highly-regarded head curator Portia James (recently deceased), teamed up with guest researchers Marjorie Lightman and William Zeisel in offering a retrospection and analysis of key local "change" events that impacted the District on all frontiers.

City residents or those who visited D.C. during that period will certainly recognize some of those events: the redevelopment of Southwest; the forced exodus to Anacostia public housing; the building of Metro; the founding of two District public colleges; the discovery of Roberta Flack at Mr. Henry's bar on Capitol Hill; and the establishment of Howard University's WHUR.

But there's more. Those who view the exhibition will also get an opportunity to see the pen that President Johnson used to sign the 1965 Voting Rights Act, an album-walled listening and resource room, and the guitar of Go Go originator Chuck Brown.

"People think that the city as it exists today has always been this way but that's not so – this exhibition takes a complex period in D.C.'s history and presents an easy to follow strand that illustrates a tumultuous period that really laid the groundwork for current D.C.," Lightman said.

Melvin Deal, a dance scholar and choreographer, described the period as "an exciting time."

"We offered free classes for youth in order to give them more positive activities and to provide a safe haven for them and the Black United Fund, led by the Rolarks, played a critical role because of their financial support. People were hungry for knowledge about their culture and themselves. African dance, which we taught, was considered a form of activism. Actually, you were an activist just by the very nature of the things you did," he said.

D.C. painter and resident Barbara Frank served as one of several individuals who worked to organize women artists in the 1970s. She said that despite the efforts of her and other activists, recent conversations show that both on the local and national levels, women artists remain at the bottom of the totem pole.

"It was a challenge making a living as an artist back then but we did the best we could – it was a time when others supported us as we found our own voices," Frank said. "One of the challenges we all faced was the struggle against the national identity of the city. We're still a local community, not as strong as other cities like Baltimore, and we're still fighting to get the vote."

Photographer Vernard Gray, whose iconic photo of Marion Barry and Walter Washington has been seen by millions, captured the daily goings on of the District from 1963 thru 1975.

"I remember being at Vermont Avenue Baptist Church and taking photos of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. just two months before he was assassinated," Gray said. "I grew up with Marvin Gaye and was asked to capture images of that day in 1972 when he received the key to the city. We were just doing our job, but there were those moments when I sensed that something historic was occurring," said Gray, who later opened his own gallery and now produces jazz programs in Southeast and in Baltimore.

Chuck Brown, in the lyrics to his song "We the People," said, "Whenever we the people understand one another, we the people can love each other – as the people."

Perhaps that's what this new exhibition can teach all of us.