

# Black History Takes a Road Trip



Photos by Barry L. Mason

By Nicole Whitsett

As a group of schoolchildren huddle around a multicolored trivia wheel, a grandmother carefully peruses a collection of black-and-white photographs. A few feet away, her two grown daughters type a name into an online genealogy registry, searching for new insight into their family's story. With hundreds of people moving in, out, and about this cozy space filled with activities and memorabilia, it is hard to imagine that in a day or so it will pack up and head down the road to share its treasures with another city.

This past February *American Legacy* magazine launched its first "Know Your History" Mobile Tour, a traveling exhibition perched on the back of an 18-wheeler, which visited 15 U.S. cities throughout Black History Month. The mini-museum included poster-size magazine covers chronicling important eras in black history, taking local residents on a journey of the African-American experience through the pages of *American Legacy*. Iconic figures like Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X graced the walls of the elegantly decorated trailer, alongside less-recognizable faces of some of the many unsung heroes that constantly emerge in every issue of the magazine. In fact, this knack for unearthing long-lost accounts of significant historical events recently garnered the publication national recognition. Released in December 2007, the critically acclaimed film *The Great Debaters*, starring and directed by Denzel Washington and produced by Oprah Winfrey, was inspired by an article published in the Spring 1997 issue.

The "Know Your History" Mobile Tour was the brainchild of publisher Rodney J. Reynolds. Concerned about the lack of in-depth instruction in schools related to African-American history and culture, Reynolds is dedicated to filling the void, not only through the magazine but also with programs and events that bring history directly to the community. "Our mission has always been to teach our history and help to restore pride and self-esteem to those in and outside our community, specifically our young people. I thought this was a novel way to bring history into school districts and neighborhoods across America."

Proving the old adage "If you build it, they will come," the "Know Your History" Mobile Tour attracted more than 5,000 visitors along its route from Detroit, Michigan, to Harlem in New York City, pulling in as many as 800 people in a seven-hour period in Baltimore, Maryland. Parents brought children; children brought grandparents. At one point three generations of a single family were represented as a grandmother, mother, and child all roamed the exhibit together, marveling at the untold stories of their heritage. "It's amazing how much you learn that you don't know about your history," one Philadelphia resident noted.

To take this project from idea to 18 wheels, worked in partnership with sponsors Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation (GPTMC), PBS, and Wachovia Bank, each of which saw the tour as a unique chance to underscore its commitment to cultural awareness. By showcasing its programs and services designed to help

African-Americans make wise financial decisions, Wachovia strengthened its connection with the diverse communities it serves. "When we think of brand awareness, we want to make people comfortable with our organization by showing how we honor diversity," noted Alisa Joseph, vice president, African-American Segment Leader of Wachovia.

By the same token, Philadelphia, long hailed as a premier destination for heritage travel, also seized the opportunity to establish itself as focal point of black history. "We're doing this because, when it comes to African-American history, Philadelphia is the hub, especially when you talk about early African-American history," said Patricia Washington, vice president of the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation (GPTMC). PBS commemorates Black History Month with special programming highlighting the achievements of African-Americans. This year, in addition to its support of the mobile museum, it aired *African American Lives 2*, a four-part series exploring roots, race, and identity through the ancestry of remarkable individuals.

Ancestry proved to be one of the major attractions of the mobile museum, which included a genealogy kiosk where visitors could trace their roots on Ancestry.com using the U.S. census and learn how to build their own family tree. They also enjoyed taking a spin at the interactive Black History Trivia Wheel for a chance to test their knowledge of African-American history and win prizes. A section showcasing historical pictures by the renowned photographer

Leroy Henderson provided rare glimpses into the lives and times of such famous African-American women as Coretta Scott King, Betty Shabazz, Aretha Franklin, and Maya Angelou.

One 80-year-old Baltimore resident found the pictures particularly inspiring since he had once been Henderson's neighbor in Richmond, Virginia. "I wanted to know more [about the photos], so I could go back and tell my people."

Another visitor, in Detroit, pointed out that the mobile tour would be a great year-round project because it takes African-American history off the printed page, breathes new life into it, and encourages people to actively participate in discovering more about themselves and where they came from. "It's one thing to read it in a book, but when you can actually see the visual, it has a spiritual attachment to it, and it makes you remember what you're here for, what your obligation is. It's a great concept, and just to have it brought here for the one day is a privilege."

Spreading the word about the accomplishments and contributions of African-Americans is perfectly in sync with what Reynolds hopes to achieve with his museum-on-the-move. "This unique experience will be just another approach to help people feel good about where they've been and give them hope on what they can achieve." ■

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