

Founding Director of Smithsonian's New African American Museum Tells of Challenges

Lonnie G. Bunch III Gives Paul Lyons Memorial Lecture at Stockton

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Galloway Township, NJ - The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, set to open next year on the Mall in Washington D.C., will be about "how a community shapes a country, and the country benefits," said its founding director in a recent lecture at The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

"I want this museum to be about national identity," said Lonnie G. Bunch III at the Paul Lyons Memorial Lecture on March 26 at Stockton. He said it "must not be a museum by black people and for black people," but one that "speaks in truth and candor, but also reconciliation."

Bunch spoke about the challenges of building the museum, which occupies the last available space on the National Mall, near the Washington Monument.

He said some members of Congress are helpful, while others have been hostile. He told of getting a letter addressed: "Dear Left Wing Historian," in which the writer said, "'America's greatest strength is her ability to forget.'" If that's true, he said, "I'm out of a job."

Bunch said he gets racist letters and "about four death threats a month." He also spoke about divisions within the African American community. "Some African Americans don't want the museum to tell stories of lynchings and embarrass the African-American community," he said. "One called me Judas."

Some say, "Don't tell those stories that make us look like victims," Bunch said. Others want the museum to show "what they did to us," as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum does. But at the Holocaust museum, he said, "the bad guys aren't Americans."

He said about \$420 million of the \$500 million needed for the project has been raised so far, and credited his board, which includes Oprah Winfrey, Colin Powell and Laura Bush, with helping see the museum through. Each has given 10 years to the project so far, he said.

“That tells you how powerful this idea is,” he said.

He has received small contributions from many others, including \$8 from a man shining his shoes in a rail station. “This may be the only way my grandchildren will understand,” the man told Bunch.

The Newark, NJ native told of his grandmother, who “took in laundry in Atlantic City from hotels, to ensure that her children and grandchildren would not have to do it.”

Bunch’s nearly 30-year career in the museum field spans four decades. In 2005, he was named one of the 100 most influential museum professionals by the American Association of Museums. He is a widely published author and has written on topics ranging from the black military experience, the American presidency and all black towns in the American west to diversity in museum management and the impact of funding and politics on American museums.

The museum found 30,000 artifacts by traveling around the nation and the world. “Saving African American Treasures” was modeled on “Antiques Roadshow,” and partnered with local museums to show people how to preserve their pieces of history, he said.

Many were willing to donate, and “we encouraged them to give it to the local museums,” he said. “But if it’s really cool, it’s coming back to D.C.”

This museum “has to help all Americans wrestle with our global self,” Bunch said. The African American experience “is all of our story. This is the quintessential story that shapes us all.”

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