

Black history to hit road Detroit

Teacher plans to take his mobile museum of African-American memorabilia to neighborhoods

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Khalid el-Hakim is an avid collector of African-American memorabilia and has enough artifacts to stock a small museum.

Among the items in his collection are a fund-raising letter written by Booker T. Washington dated March 20, 1915; a signed hockey stick from Willie O'Ree, the first black man to play in the National Hockey League, and a scrapbook kept by Robert Miles, a Michigan Ku Klux Klansman.

Although el-Hakim has displayed items from his 1,500-plus collection in the atrium of the Coleman A. Young Municipal Building in Detroit and other places, he now has a bigger vision.

At a time when budget cuts are making it hard for some students to visit the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History and other museums, el-Hakim wants to bring the museum to them.

"I just had this vision of having this trailer and going into neighborhoods," said el-Hakim, a Detroit Public Schools social studies teacher.

He has drawn help in making a mobile museum a reality. The trailer, which sits in a vacant lot on Wildemere Street on Detroit's west side, is being renovated.

His mother, Dorothy McKinney of Detroit, gave him the 9 1/2 -by 30-foot trailer that had belonged to his late stepfather.

Students and teachers at the Design Center of the University of Detroit Mercy volunteered to develop blueprints for the museum. And students and staff members at Young Detroit Builders' YouthBuild/Americorps, a GED/job training program for ages 18-24, are working on the project with Havana Construction.

"They said it was a mobile museum, and I wanted to be part of it," said Tavun Debold, 18, of Detroit, who has worked as a volunteer to get the trailer in shape.

Young Detroit Builders' instructors Derrick Tagger, 32, of Detroit and John Wurtsmith, 43, of Flat Rock also have volunteered on their days off.

"I thought it would be good for the community," Wurtsmith said.

The trailer has been gutted, new windows and wiring have been installed, and plywood has been put on the ceiling. Tagger pointed out an area near the door where a computer station will be installed for children to access the Internet.

Across town in Indian Village, the living room of el-Hakim's apartment is lined with posters, photographs, paintings, dolls and other artifacts, all part of the Bell Collection. He gave it that name to honor his family, he said.

His collection has items from the 1800s such as a bank that is caricature of a black man in a top hat with red exaggerated lips and rolling eyes, and posters featuring the late rapper Proof.

"It's really a diverse collection," el-Hakim said. "It dates from slavery all the way to hip-hop culture. A lot of people take these items and put them in private collections and the people don't have access to them."

El-Hakim said he began collecting 15 years ago, inspired in part by Ferris State University professor David Pilgrim's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. Hakim studied business education and social studies at Ferris State and graduated in 1994.

Wright also was an inspiration, he said.

"If I can leave an imprint on a child the way the Charles H. Wright Museum left an imprint on me," el-Hakim said. "Then my job is done."

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