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African American Museum reopens after 'generous' community help

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Bowling Green's African American Museum opens to visitors by appointment the final exhibit pieces back up after reopening earlier this month following a tornado in December 2021. (Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com gramey)

MORE INFORMATION



Marred by tornado and fire, African American museum hopes to reopen with community support

Watheta Buford was supposed to return to work at Bowling Green’s African American Museum around two weeks after a tornado damaged the building in December 2021.

But an electrical fire delayed her plans.

“Our building was totally damaged,” said Buford, the museum’s project manager. “The building had to be totally remodeled, and this is Western Kentucky University’s building, so they had to redo everything.”

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It wasn’t until earlier this month, nearly a year and a half later, that the museum finally held an official

ribbon cutting to reopen to the public.

But as Buford will tell you, the work never stopped.

“Once the fire came, all the museums around Bowling Green worked together to take up the restoration,” Buford said.

It took three other museums – the National Corvette Museum, the Downing Museum and the Kentucky Museum – to bring their collection back in order.

“We had no idea how to restore our stuff or how to clean anything damaged from the fire,” Buford said. “We were trying to, but we didn’t know.”

Brent Bjorkman, director of the Kentucky Museum and Kentucky Folklife Program, has a “long relationship” with the museum and staff and helped to mobilize the recovery.

He said efforts to put out the fire left many items waterlogged and covered in soot. As much as 20% of the collection was beyond saving.

“I assembled folks from the Kentucky Museum and folks from the library special collections here at WKU,” Bjorkman said. “We got out about 50 tables ... and we started to dry things out.”

Photographs, newspaper clippings, books and more were laid out alongside industrial fans in hopes of saving relics of Bowling Green’s African-American heritage. Hard decisions had to be made as to whether some items could be kept.

“What a time to try to evaluate your collection,” Bjorkman said. “It’s a very small museum and they don’t have the help they need for archiving and things like that, but they’ve done a wonderful job over their existence.”

Bjorkman connected with Leah Craig, interim director of collections at the NCM, after she reached out to the African American Museum’s board to offer help.

“Any time another museum suffers a disaster, I think museum professionals feel for each other,” Craig said.

Craig said the community effort to help the NCM after a sinkhole cave-in damaged the museum in 2014 inspired them to give back however they could.



Having worked previously in small museums, Craig said she knew how much of a “cornerstone” the African American Museum was in telling the history of Bowling Green.

Craig said the water damage on many items risked long-term damage, but thankfully, the NCM had an available freezer that could mitigate things like mold and deterioration. They signed

a loan agreement and stored many items until they could be worked on further.

For a time, Craig and the NCM had done what they could, so they stepped aside while the Kentucky Museum helped raise funds for the recovery.

The museum helped organize a GoFundMe drive which raised over \$5,000 in around two months.

They also helped apply for grants to bring in conservators to assess the damage and found a space at WKU's South Campus for museum staff to work during repairs.

As the work progressed, Bjorkman reached out to Jack LeSieur, director and curator of the Downing Museum.

LeSieur began as a collections manager at the museum in 2013 in the wake of a fire that damaged over a thousand collection items. His experience proved useful to the African American Museum.

“I went over and looked at things first and honestly, it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be there,” LeSieur said. “Some things are completely damaged, but I think most everything was housed in some sort of box, which is good.”

Relieved, LeSieur began advising staff on how best to mitigate what was damaged. He returned with Craig to help train staff and volunteers in a workshop.

Craig said she had coincidentally done an artifact-handling workshop at the NCM not long before and easily adapted it for the recovery effort.

“She kind of handled things like, ‘this is how you handle museum objects,’ and I picked up from there,” LeSieur said. “I showed them like, ‘you have a photograph here, here are ways that you can clean this and not damage it.’ That’s the most important thing, not causing any more harm than there is.”

LeSieur said it was a pleasure to give back to the museum, which he said is a valuable asset to the city.

“That museum is really important and that part of Bowling Green’s story needs to be told,” LeSieur said. “I was glad to help them kind of get back on their feet.”

Buford said some finishing touches are still needed upstairs and in the library area, but the museum is currently open to appointments.

She said the work from other museums and donations from the public proved “tremendously helpful” and she’s incredibly grateful for their efforts.

“These people have been very generous,” Buford said.

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