

National Black Theatre Festival honors volunteers

Special tribute given to the late Joyce Elem

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A powerful wave of purple and black hit downtown last Thursday.

Hundreds of volunteers from the National Black Theatre Festival, clad in the signature colors of the festival, gathered at the Adam's Mark Winston Plaza Hotel for a special tribute for their service during the festival.

Thousands of volunteers from across the state worked during the festival, which was held in August, serving in a host of roles from ushering theatergoers to their seats to orchestrating the massive transportation network that moved actors and audiences to the festival's far-flung venues.

Men and women, boys and girls gathered to be recognized for their service to the festival. This year's reception was dedicated to the memory of Joyce Elem, a former NBTF volunteer co-coordinator. Ms. Elem died recently after a lengthy bout with cancer.

"I thank God for giving me the vision for the North Carolina Black Repertory Company," said Larry Leon Hamlin, founder/artistic director of the NCBRC. "The recent pictorial history of Winston-Salem is an outstanding text. Through it, we got a chance to see (what impact) the North Carolina Black Repertory Company and the National Black Theatre Festival is having.

"This would not have been possible without the support we received from Winston-Salem over the years. ... Without God, without the blessings He has bestowed upon us, it would not be possible."

Hamlin reminded the audience about the next project, the National Black Theatre Festival Hall of Fame and Museum. He appealed for the help of those who have maintained memorabilia regarding the company and the

festival over the years. Hamlin also had two special people to thank.

"I thank God for my wife," he said. "And I also am thankful for the elder in my life who I can confide in and go to for wisdom, W. T. Jenkins, the president of the board of directors. He has given me wonderful, logical advice when I wanted to go out on a limb."

During remarks, Mayor Jack Cavanagh praised Hamlin and his wife, Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, for bringing the festival to the city.

"It is truly a pleasure to be with you. I have learned through the CIAA and this International Black Theatre Festival, art and basketball - it is family in its very essence...it is something special," Cavanagh said. "We seek identity for the entire community. We want to focus on the center of our city where the heart pump is. Our essence is in art and culture. We cannot afford to lose the North Carolina Black Repertory Company or the National Black Theatre Festival. We need to find African American heritage and develop it. Thank you for what you are doing. May God bless you."

Mistress of ceremonies Polanda assistant coordinators who served in various capacities. Cleopatra Solomon and Cynthia Mack of the Winston Salem Urban League received recognition as the founders of the Youth/Celebrity Project. Cheryl Harry and Willard Tanner received accolades for their contributions to the youth project.

More than 3,200 youths participated in sessions with the stars through the Celebrity Youth Event, which brought local youths and celebrities together to discuss opportunities both on and off-stage.

The event also included a moving candle lighting ceremony in memory of Ms. Elem. Gwendolyn Williams read a touching tribute as the Hamlins led in the lighting of the candles.

Sprinkle-Hamlin praised Elem's indomitable spirit.

"Joyce worked very hard. Every morning during the festival, she would call me at 7 a.m. to make sure I would be across the



Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin led the volunteers in a candlelight ceremony in honor of the late Joyce Elem, volunteer coordinator.

street by 9 a.m.," Sprinkle-Hamlin said. "She was always there. We really miss her, but we know she is in a better place."

Sprinkle-Hamlin introduced the Joyce Elem Volunteer Award. The purpose of the award is to honor individuals who exemplify the spirit of Elem's selfless contributions. Rachel P. Jackson became the first recipient of the award.

"Through the lean times, Rachel stuck with us. When there were only 30 and 40 people attending the plays, she was right there. She believed in supporting the arts and getting her family involved," Sprinkle-Hamlin said.

Cathy Elem Cumbie, Ms. Elem's sister, presented the plaque to Jackson.

Cumbie and her husband were given a memory book dedicated to Elem which documented the life of "one theatrical angel." Groups that Elem was

involved in such as the Sassy Ladies Book Club and the Triad Diamond Ski Club contributed to the memory book.

Another salute exhorted the work of the volunteers. Gerry Patton and Natalie Summers came forward to present the NBTF Rhyming Review. They honored each group of volunteers.

From the questionnaire, the audience learned several facts about NBTF. The opening production for the festival in 1989 was "Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope." Lavon Williams designed the NBTF logo. The two new components that were added to the 1999 festival were the Hip-Hop Theatre and the Collegiate Theatre.

The first chairperson of the festival was acclaimed poet Maya Angelou.

The next festival will be held July 30-Aug. 4, 2001.



Larry Leon Hamlin, founder/artistic director of the National Black Theatre Festival, thanked the volunteers for their support.

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