

Tribute raises millions to help pay group's mortgage

National Council of Negro Women has a building between White House and Capitol

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

WASHINGTON — Oprah Winfrey, Don King, Danny Glover and a host of others made civil rights leader



King

Dorothy Height's 90th birthday wish come true. The gala in honor of her birthday on March 20 in Washington, D.C., raised more than \$6.5 million to retire the mortgage on the historic National Council of Negro Women national headquarters building at 633 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W. The building is one of the few along the famed stretch of road owned by African Americans.

What began with a challenge and a donation by Don King of \$110,000 was quickly taken up by Oprah, who announced a \$2.5 million gift. The Freddie Mac Foundation added \$1 million. Danny Glover, who co-hosted the

evening with Oprah, added \$100,000 in memory of his mother, who was a longtime NCNW section president in San Francisco. The outpouring of corporate and private philanthropy continued. Even some children and teens stepped forward to make \$100 donations.

Other notables in attendance included Maya Angelou (who received the evening's Uncommon Height award); Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton; Education Secretary Rod Paige; Coretta Scott King; Al Sharpton; former Labor Secretary Alexis Herman; D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams; Dick Gregory; and a host of political leaders, including



Angelou

Congresswoman Maxine Waters; Ambassador Susula of South Africa and Susan Taylor. The building fulfills one of NCNW founder Mary McLeod Bethune's greatest wishes — to establish a strong presence of African-American women in the nation's capital to ensure their voices are heard. It is located midway between the White House and



Winfrey

the Capitol and is the only property owned by an African-American organization on the "corridor of power." It will house the National Centers for African American Women, including the Dorothy I. Height Leadership Institute.

The property has added historic significance because it stands on the corner of the historic site of Washington's slave market. There, in 1848, 77 fugitive slaves were sold after the largest group attempted escape on the Underground Railroad. In that group were two teen-age girls, the Edmondson sisters, who played a crucial role in galvanizing public support for the Abolitionist Movement and inspiring Harriet Beecher Stowe to write "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

NCNW purchased the building in 1996.

Since being called in by the city of New York as a social worker to help deal with the Harlem riots of 1935, Height has worked for social justice from the grass-roots to the White House to wedge open doors previously closed



Dorothy Height with President Clinton in 1998. Height has been a driving force behind the National Council of Negro Women for decades.

to African-American women.

She played a historic role planning the Civil Rights Movement with Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, John Lewis and A. Phillip Randolph. She has known and worked with some of the greatest figures of the 20th century, including W.C. Handy, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Adam Clayton Powell, Mary McLeod Bethune, Eleanor Roosevelt and every

president since Truman.

Height is a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, and the prestigious NAACP Springarn Medal, among many other honors.

The National Council of Negro Women is a coalition of 38 national organizations and 250 community-based chartered sections with an outreach to 4 million members.

NCNW has its headquarters in Washington, D.C., and has international offices in Senegal and Zimbabwe.

"It was a never-to-be-forgotten evening," stated Height. "With this gesture the National Council of Negro Women will not only burn its mortgage but seed an endowment and assure the future. We can never forget our good friends and members who have made this possible."

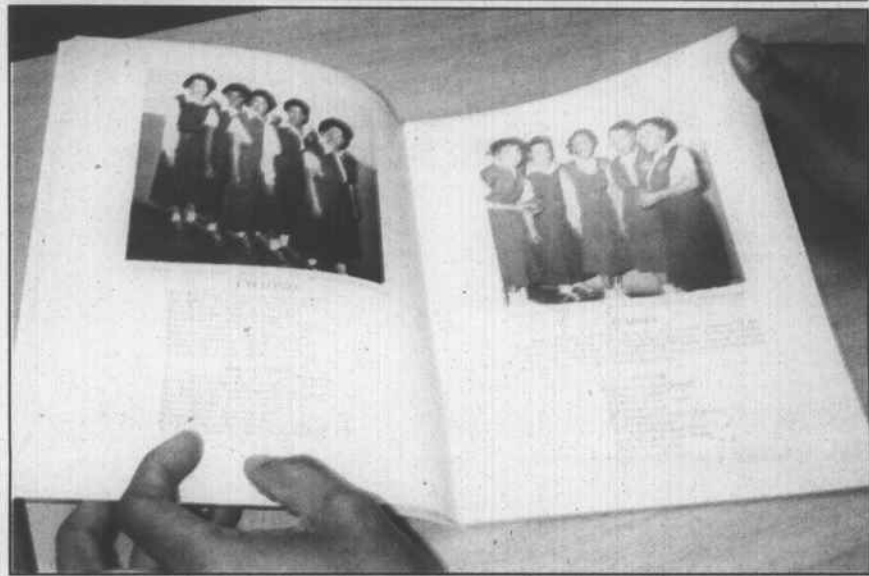


Photo by Kevin Walker

Philip Merrill flips through a team book for a 1940s black female bowling league.

Merrill

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and those who want to get their hands on such items. The company also has thousands of historical items in its archives, items that are often rented to film companies to make period pieces look more authentic.

The Baltimore-based Unity Cultural Center is the not-for-profit arm of the company. Many of the items Merrill has collected are on display at the center, where Merrill serves as director.

During the many lectures that he gives all over the country, Merrill often emphasizes that items that many people think have no historical or financial value may, in fact, be very significant.

"You need to know what to look for, how to look for it and how to interpret...It's important to have community outreach programs that will help to enlighten the public," he said.

Merrill has found prized possessions in a variety of forms: a team book from an all black women's bowling league in the 1940s, a Knights of the Ku Klux Klan constitution from the 1960s, a letter written to a friend by famed writer Zora Neale Hurston while she was living in Durham.

A few of the items that Merrill holds make him poke his chest out a bit. He has a rare photo of freedom fighter Sojourner Truth and a letter written by abolitionist and journalist Frederick Douglass.

Merrill has purchased some of the items he has. Others have been simply given to him by families to ensure their prosperity, and still others have come by way of very untraditional means.

"I will look in trash cans," Merrill said with a grin. "People are used to seeing me in my suits on 'Antiques Roadshow,' but I'm a dumpster-diving king."

Merrill also regularly visits flea markets and garage sales.

Ironically, he brought along with him items related to Winston-Salem he purchased at yard sales in his hometown of Baltimore. These items included a degree from Winston-Salem Teachers College, the school that became Winston-Salem State University, and a yearbook from Atkins High School, circa 1960.

"As people pass on and move on, so does their stuff," said Merrill, explaining how he was able to find the items in his neck of the woods.

"Antiques Roadshow," which features a number of appraisers like Merrill who look over items and tell owners whether they have diamonds or duds, is one of the most popular shows on PBS and it has developed somewhat of a cult following. Merrill said some of the regular appraisers on the show now travel with bodyguards to shield them from enthusiastic female fans.

Although Merrill has been a regular on the show for some time now, he said he still hates to tell people that grandma's old eyeglasses or doll set is virtually worthless.

"I am very neutral when I do an appraisal, but I also try to be very personable with people," he said.

In between lectures and appearances on the television show, Merrill has found much to keep him busy. He has recently gotten his hands on 1,000 documents dating back to the 1820s pertaining to an inter-racial family. Merrill is researching the documents in hopes of publishing a book about the find. He also is searching for descendants of the family, some of whom he said are passing for white today in various parts of the country.

Merrill also is writing a book about the construction of Alaska's Alcan Highway, which was constructed in bone-chilling conditions by black soldiers during World War II. Merrill has already interviewed a local man for the book, Hayward Oubre. Oubre, a well-known artist, developed the arts program at WSSU and was one of the soldiers who helped to build the 1,500-mile highway that connects British Columbia, Canada, with Fairbanks, Alaska. The book should be out by this fall.

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