

Panel, exhibit examine city's black history

By Shelby Macri
smacri@turley.com

When Erika Slocumb was invited to lead an oral history project on the black community of Holyoke, she wasn't sure where to start.

"I said, 'First off, there are no black people in Holyoke,' and then we started to go into the archives at Wistariahurst and the history is there," said Slocumb, a Springfield native and Ph.D. student at the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at UMass-Amherst. "It goes back to the 18th century of prominent black people in the community who

helped build Holyoke before it was Holyoke, as a city. Even when the names are documented in history books, it's not associated with who these people are."

What resulted was Reliquary of Blackness, a history exhibit at Wistariahurst Museum in Holyoke. Slocumb spoke about her research at a Black History Month panel discussion at Holyoke Community College this week. Also at the event were several members of Holyoke's black community who participated in the project.

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Erika Slocumb stands with a section of her Holyoke history exhibit, Reliquary of Blackness, on display at the Holyoke Community College library.

Photo by Shelby Macri

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"We're still here, we are here and we're not going anywhere!" exclaimed panelist Jacqueline Westbrook when she heard of Slocumb's initial reaction. "We're here to discuss 'You can't sit down on the bus' and 'You have to sit at the back of the classroom,' all of that. I'm praising her — Slocumb — because she is bringing that alive. You can't forget where we came from, 'cause we're still here, we aren't going anywhere, I'm not. With that being said, I give it all to Erika, she is a godsend."

Slocumb said she was careful to keep her project focused on authentic voices from Holyoke's black residents.

"We have to hold museums accountable for the way that they handle our history, and also, I think, we have to reclaim the space," Slocumb said. "I've been working on this project with the community and at every step of the way, I'm in contact with the community. You asked me here to speak, and the first thing I said was, 'We're going to get folks from the community, right?' Because this is their history, and if we're going to treat it like it should be treated, if we're going to treat it like a holy thing, if we're going to treat it like a respectful thing, then we have to respect the people and treat the individuals and artifacts as holy relics."

Panel stories

Westbrook was joined on the panel by Dian McCollum, Trudy Monson, Emikan Sudan a.k.a. James McElroy, and Doug Griffin. All five of the panelists helped Slocumb gather information, artifacts and stories for Reliquary of Blackness.

Each panelist talked about growing up and their experiences in Holyoke schools. Many of the panelists graduated from HCC and have stayed local. Griffin, Monson, McCollum and McElroy each spoke about the first time they experienced racism and they each remembered their first introduction to the "N-word."

"I asked my father what it meant, and he wanted to know where I heard that. I said at school," Monson recalled. "Then he asked me what I did when they said that. I told him I started looking

around 'cause I didn't know what it was. He told me that's what they think I am, and he said, 'It means ignorant, and it definitely isn't you.'"

McElroy spoke of growing up on Main Street, and one day he was playing with his sister and neighborhood friends when a group of new kids walked by. They were white and pointed at their group and started saying racial slurs and throwing things at them. McElroy spoke of his mother being a preacher's daughter, and that he was raised by the Bible, and is typically a peacemaker. Though as he was telling his friends not to react, one child threw a brick at his head and that's when he and his group started to defend themselves. These are important stories to remember, said McElroy, because they didn't happen too long ago.

While many of the panelists could remember instances of racial slurs in school, they mostly recalled being ignored — not picked on but not noticed, either. Some explained that they didn't face much outright racism, but that teachers and educators would steer black kids to trade schools, or assume that black kids were not likely to succeed academically.

McElroy recalled teaching at Street School, a converted factory on Race Street that served as a last-chance option for teens who had dropped out of the public schools. Westbrook spoke of dropping out of school because she couldn't handle the way other kids treated her, but that she went to Street School and was able to receive her GED the same year she was supposed to graduate.

Monson spoke of being one of only six black kids in her graduating class in 1966, and her oldest daughter graduated in 1996 with only six or seven black kids.

'A treasure chest'

Slocumb said the people she interviewed were a testament to what life in Holyoke used to be like. She referred to Griffin as the "Holyoke historian" because of how much he recalls about the city's past, and the many artifacts his family has preserved.

Griffin, for his part, praised Slocumb.

"I was very happy to work with her

— Slocumb — on this because having lived through a lot of this period of time, I felt it was very important, because there have been a lot of changes and some are good and some are bad," Griffin said. "There was a DVD that came out about the history of Holyoke and one thing I noted while watching it was that, while it covers a lot of different things, it does not cover the black impact in Holyoke. I felt it very important that people understood that, because we've been here for a long time, we've had an impact on the city and people need to know it."

"To me it feels like opening up a treasure chest," McCollum said about her

role in the project, and seeing the completed Reliquary of Blackness on display at Wistariahurst.

The exhibit is on display at the Wistariahurst Museum, with sections on loan to the Holyoke Community College Library, and the New Africa House at UMass-Amherst. Slocumb said she's trying to have the sections of the exhibit displayed at American International College because of its large gallery space, either in the spring or fall semester. She is also working on a grant to create a traveling exhibit that institutions can "sign out" from Wistariahurst and display at their location for a time.



Panelists Emikan Sudan a.k.a James McElroy, seated, and Jacqueline Westbrook speak at a Black History Month panel at Holyoke Community College on Wednesday. Photos by Shelby Macri



From left, historian Erika Slocumb sits on a panel with her Holyoke oral history subjects Trudy Monson, Dian McCollum and Doug Griffin.