

Morehouse Seeks to Build a 'World House' With King Collection

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Delays and financial setbacks have hindered efforts

Morehouse College is teaming up with Atlanta's leaders to develop the \$125 million center that will exhibit the Morehouse King Collection and highlight the role of historically black colleges and universities in social justice struggles.

The city has been known for its desire to be a player on the world's stage since a community coalition worked on bringing the Olympics to Atlanta in 1996.

Morehouse wishes the same. "The vision has been that the Center for Civil and Human Rights will be the primary exhibition facility for the papers," Doug Shipman, Executive Director of the Center for Civil and Human Rights Partnership, told Black College Wire recently. However, Morehouse will remain the owner of the papers and the "scholarly drive" behind the King Collection which is currently being held in the Robert Woodruff Library that Morehouse shares with the other Atlanta University Center Schools.

"We see ourselves as the public outlet when someone wants to bring their family," Shipman said. "When a scholar wants to study the King papers, Morehouse is the institution that will be their partner in their academic pursuit."

So, the 141-year-old HBCU has been doing everything it could for the last two years to leverage the Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection that the city gave as a gift to the school.

"It can only enhance Morehouse's reputation, nationally and internationally, and carries the Morehouse tradition of our alumni, prominent, well-known alumni, [being] closely connected with the college," former president Walter E. Massey said in an interview with Black College Wire shortly after the news was announced two years ago. "It's another recognition that we are among the finest colleges in the world, the fact that this kind of collection would be entrusted into our oversight," Massey said in the June 2006 interview.

However, at the time, neither the school nor the city clearly defined how they intended to capitalize on the acquisition of the 10,000 piece collection that was left in Coretta Scott King's basement. There had been suggestion that the papers would be exhibited at a museum that Mayor Shirley Franklin had been planning. The only thing that was clear was that a deal that mobilized \$32 million in 11 days to save the papers from auction would be used in some significant way. But the loan had to be extended due to slow fundraising.

Early opposition to the plan took many forms. "Will the legacy of freedom be secure with the pending transfer to Morehouse College?" asked Pulitzer Prize winning King biographer Taylor Branch in a scathing op-ed in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in July 2006. He cited murky terms of sale and the lack of facilities on Morehouse's campus.

Since then, the mayor, who led the charge to buy the papers, business and community leaders have made significant progress in designating how and where the papers will be used. It will anchor the Center for Civil and Human Rights that is slated to break ground in 2009.

Woodruff Library has received a grant to help fund the processing of the paper and has engaged in a joint initiative with Boston University where over 80,000 items that belonged to King remain and Stanford's King Institute to make a master catalogue of all archival materials.

Library officials said that the collection would be available for scholarly use in late fall.

The Center will be a 100,000 square foot complex that will be dedicated to the history of civil rights struggles and the future of social justice globally. It will include exhibition, performance, and meeting space as well as a media facility.

"The Center for Civil and Human rights is a living institution that will both celebrate and educate around civil rights history, especially Atlanta's history," said Shipman, adding that history is "a springboard to talk about contemporary issues of civil and human rights."

From the outset, organizers envisioned the center as a powerful economic engine for the city, further propelling it to international stature. An economic impact study prepared by the consulting firm Deloitte and released by the CCHR Partnership showed that the project would generate \$1.2 billion in economic activity for the Atlanta metro area and create 1,550 new jobs.

The international aspirations were highlighted during U. N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's visit to the Atlanta University Center to view the papers. "Today, my admiration grew even further, as I saw the papers lodged in this

library," Ban told an audience of the city's movers and shakers, faculty and students at Woodruff. "Seeing the original of 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' with paragraphs that Dr. King wrote on scraps of paper, I could only imagine what intellectual courage and conviction went into the effort," he said, according to the UN news service.

This is all, in fact, an effort by diverse stakeholders to brand Atlanta as a leader in civil and human rights. The Center has had conversations with the UN to host conferences and events on human rights, according to Shipman.

Like Atlanta, Morehouse has worked to attain an international profile over the past several years, charging the Andrew Young Center for International Affairs with the task of globalizing the campus and its curriculum in 1998 and the Leadership Center with educating globally-conscious leaders. The King Collection energizes these efforts.

"Morehouse 's future depends on cultivated, visionary leadership that is rooted in deep memory," said Walter Fluker, executive director of the Leadership Center and interim director of the King Collection. "The king papers help provide that."

Fluker has also managed the Howard Thurman papers project. Thurman, a renowned scholar and Morehouse alumnus, influenced much of the civil rights movement, particularly King. Fluker now offers courses on the ethical leadership of both King and Thurman.

Fluker insisted King and Thurman present a communitarian idea of the world that humanity is begging for. "The connection is not just local or national and certainly just not for the African-american community," he said. "We have a way of talking in a new way about global citizenship and addressing the concerns of people like Thomas Friedman and Fareed Zakaria."

Morehouse has initiated a number of programs in relation to the papers, most notably, World House at Morehouse. On the 40th anniversary of King's assassination, Morehouse organized a simultaneous webcast that connected audiences at Morehouse College to China, South Africa, Kenya, India and the University of Florida that explored King's idea of the "World House," a theme that appears in his papers. The webcasts are viewable on YouTube.

Fluker hosted the first session from Beijing. Morehouse students who won an essay competition that explored some of King's ideas read their essays during the webcast.

For Fluker, the courses and special programs that stem from King and Thurman are about creating discourse to empower a new generation of global black leaders.

"Not only is Morehouse changed forever now, but the world is," Fluker said. "And how Africans and how African-Americans are situated in the world and how they will be situated will depend on a new kind of elite leadership that comes forth."

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