

Preserving Bronzeville's historic treasures

by Timuel D. Black

A small group to which I belong, headed by Esther M. Barnett, widow of the late Ald. William "Bill" Barnett, social activist and tour guide Harold Lucas and author Nathan Thompson, has a plan to build obelisks as permanent structures on every corner of 35th Street from Federal Street to Cottage Grove Avenue. The mission of the group is to continue economic development in the historic Bronzeville community and to preserve its rich heritage. Therefore, our immediate mission is to place permanent structures throughout the community telling the story of the making of the formerly great community of the old South Side called the "Black Belt."

We have been quite successful in acquiring the enthusiastic support of the politicians in this area such as Ald. Madeline Haithcock (2nd), Ald. Dorothy Tillman (3rd) and Ald. Toni Preckwinkle (4th). Also supporting us are U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, Illinois Rep. Elga Jeffries and other community leaders. We are on our way to a much deserved success in our mission.

However, as I read the article in the Sept. 20 edition of the Hyde Park Herald regarding the destruction of the murals at 47th and 51st

commentary



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streets. I realized how quickly precious history can be removed. Having been alerted to the destruction of those murals, the Black Heritage in Bronzeville group will be watchful as we build monuments to the rich history of this community. Too much of the physical history, such as the Regal Theater, has been destroyed already. We can only build a monument to memorialize that loss. I am hopeful that those destroyed murals can be restored.

The Bronzeville history that we hope to carry forth has many of its physical structures still standing. These include the Supreme Life building at 35th Street and King Drive (formerly South Parkway), the Overton Hygiene buildings at 36th and State streets and the



Owen M. Lawson III

The panel above from left to right, Chinwe Onyeagoro, Bernita Johnson and Yolanda Neff, spoke about preserving Bronzeville historic landmarks Sept. 22.

Parkway Ballroom building at 45th Street and King Drive. Among places of worship still standing are Quinn Chapel, AME (African Methodist Episcopal) at 24th Street and Wabash Avenue, Olivet Baptist Church at 31st Street and King Drive and Ebenezer Baptist Church on 45th Street. Even these could be in danger if not carefully watched and preserved. The recently ravaged Pilgrim Baptist Church is an example of that possibility.

Famous elementary schools such as Drake, Douglas, Doolittle, Coleman and Burke as well as Wendell Phillips and DuSable high schools are also still with us thanks to strong alumni participation. There are examples of living spaces such as the endangered Rosenwald building bordered by 46th Street, Wabash Avenue, 47th Street and Michigan Avenue where many black families of professional and artistic stature lived. There are strips of land along King Drive from 35th to 50th streets where many young professionals are moving into refurbished brown- and grey-

stone mansions and beautiful apartment buildings that their grandparents never sold. They inherited these gems and have restored and modernized them.

So it is the mission and goal of our Black Heritage in Bronzeville group to participate as much as possible in encouraging the economic, social and cultural growth of Bronzeville as it is rapidly gentrifying. We also want to help preserve, identify and glorify as much of the physical history that still stands. With the monuments that we are striving to have erected we not only want to tell the story of things that have been preserved, but also to tell of the activities and things that are no longer. We will also tell of the persons, no longer with us, who played an important part in the beautiful history of a people who left a physically, socially, economically, politically and psychologically brutal South to come to Chicago and build a land of hope.

Tim Black is a columnist for the Outlook. The views expressed are his own.

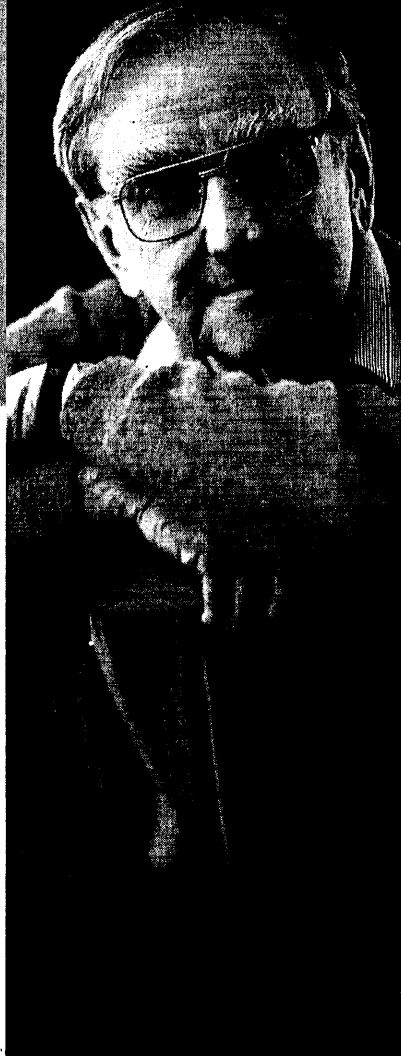
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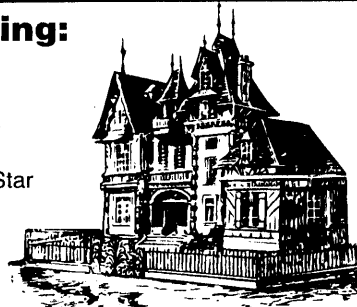
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