Beyond “Cornerstones,” common ground, history

by Mario Ashmore

UROC Executive Director Heidi Bajunai could hears elders filling in details for the documentary “Cornerstones” slated on the screen Feb. 23, stuff she’d never heard before. University of Minnesota officials commissioned the piece by tpt producer Daniel Bergin, focused on Plymouth Avenue, Homewood, East 38th and 40th, University Avenue and 46th/Highway and 44th Field, Jewish and African American heritage. They sponsored a panel discussion, “Cornerstones and Common Ground: Reflections on the History of North Minneapolis,” Feb. 20 at URUC, 30th Street Engagement Center, 3001 Plymouth Avenue, and say they are seeking ways to capture additional oral history of the community.

Already, there are numerous video segments “that didn’t make the cut” posted on URUC’s website, at uruc.umn.edu/Cornerstones. There are plans to collect more stories at an event at the Capri Theater June 10. Bergin noted these have been youth-made projects that shouldn’t be left out.

As often happens with panel discussions, time for audience comments was brief, but included the following:

T. Williams recalled prestidigitation over the sale of the Avenue for Homewood community center? building and the development of the building where it’s housed now, and residing the Urban League to merge all Northside “settlement houses.” He noted the site of the Urban Club, which has been 50 years, and the location of a Control Data Northside plant.

Willie Dominguez remembered a “vibrant West Broadway with a big parade, and queens – you still look beautiful. It brought a different flavor. A caravel at North Commons, biggest in the state, up to the 80s. The days of a lot of commerce on West Broadway, that’s missing today.”

Susan Breedlove talked about students’ hunger for history and how they clamor to go on bus tours that she organizes. Jeanne Hoblit, at 93, recalled cooking for Phyllis Wheatley because they were banned from downtown hotels.

A gentleman who said “we love the Northside beyond hope, when you’re a Northsider, you’re a Northsider” echoed walking everywhere, to North High School, but “the neighborhoods are scary now.” He said he’d like to see more about North High’s history, and what bothers him most is parents taking their kids out of local schools.

Mel Reeves wanted to hear more about the struggles, the real estate covenants. He pointed out that Zion Baptist Church was a black church built to be a black church. The film talked about synagogues that were eventually converted to black churches.

In introducing the panelists, Bergin talked about “pathology reported disproportionate” and said he wasn’t comfortable talking about today, but the Star and T Simone headlines of the 1940s and 1950s. University professor John S. Wright was interviewed in the film; his grandparents were close to Phyllis Wheatley’s center’s first head, W. Gertrude Brown. As a panelist he talked about a very early University connection, African American intellectuals presenting corvecus programs at Northrop Auditorium also stayed at the Phyllis Wheatley house.

He mentioned a segment on “The U and The Way” that didn’t make the hour program, but is on the website. In it, Mahmoud El Kail talks about how students from the African American Action Committee, connected to the Way community center, astounded for and got a Black Studies department (more permanent than a program). “It democratized the University,” opened the doors for everybody,” architecture associate professor Kathleen Solomon’s history with North Minneapolis dates back to 1963, the time of the Holman vs. Cleveland lawsuit. She commented on the archological excavations they did to study the site of “the projects” finding clay pits, native hunting grounds, and industry and single family homes. Then in the 1930s, that “complete absence. What happened?” in the film and it’s bizarre.” The original projects were small units so there could be no extended families.

Panelist Linda Schlaff, past executive director of the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, said she thought North High “didn’t give enough space” in the documentary. It was there and on Plymouth Avenue where people could meet. They could have talked about the communists and the socialists, “in Mergel’s garage we maybe start the DFL.” And there were juvenile delinquents, “The Combination,” a group of youth from Jewish and another heritage. No one will talk about the prostitutes, she said, or the loan societies that formed to avoid the need to use banks.

“There was a home where you could leave your child if you were having economic trouble, yet they could stay a part of their community.” Though not a direct outreach, it’s Now Avenue for Homewood. Schlaff added that the JHUSM is currently researching the case of Jewish kids. “Did Jews move out if this was so wonderful?”

Rowena Gross, entrepreneur and philanthropist who co-founded the Minneapolis African American Museum and Cultural Center, said it is important to capture the lessons of history or be doomed to repeat it. An important theme for her is ownership – “people should be able to own their history.” Americans, “we don’t own anything anymore.” She said life is about collaboration, and “Minneapolis won’t be a healthy city if all can participate in its benefits. The greatest goal for the greatest number.”

Rebuilding emotionally one year after the tornado

It’s not uncommon to still feel the someth- ing is missing or lost as those who lived through last year’s tornado struggle with the emotional challenge caused by the storm, “which can be harder to repair than property damage,” say producers of a video that will be distributed to those affected.

May 22 marks the one year anniversary of the tornado that ripped through North Minneapolis damaging 3,700 homes.

“Even with new or repaired housing, surviv- ing means new peoples’ feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear.” These feelings sometimes pop up long after the disaster is past, said Jennifer Calkins of ECHO, Minnesota (Emergency, Community, Health, and Outreach).

Recovering from a disaster can be very traumatic for all ages and can negatively impact a person’s overall health and wellness. To help with the emotional recovery efforts, ECHO has collaborated with Hennepin County, Hennepin County Children’s Mental Health Collaborative, the City of Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Foundation, and the North Minneapolis Community Response Team (NCR) to create a television program that discusses recovering emotionally from a dis- aster and being prepared for future emergen- cies.

ECHO will also be distributing free 1,500 DVDs of the program to the community. The program is meant to be used of other disas- ter survivors, taking the North Minneapolis tornado as an example to demonstrate how organizations and communities can come to- gether to respond to an emergency and work as a community to rebuild physically and emotionally,” Calkins said.

“For the first time we are able to do this on television, and I think it will be of great value,” said Hassan Ali Mohamed, Imam at Minneapolis Dawah Institute, said “This type of program is very very beneficial to the Somali community.” They have no ideas of how to react when they have this type of a crisis and where to go to get help. And all of this infor- mation is in their own language, which is very important.

The tornado, occurring from the Storm will air on tpt’s Minnesota Channel (Comcast Channel 202 or 243, depending on location) and public tele- vision stations across Minnesota, as well as online at elmominneapolis.org after the first week in April.

The broadcast schedule is as fol- lows:

- April 8 and May 20 at 7 p.m. in English – Guests: Dr. Lolita King, Clinical Psychologist, North Point Health and Wellness Center and Patricia Collins, Community Member and Tornado Survivor.
- April 8 and May 20 at 7:30 p.m. in Spanish – Guests: Dr. Benjamin Feigal, Clinical Psychologist at North Point Health and Wellness Center and Humberto Tineace, Community Member from the Center.
- April 15 and May 27 at 7 p.m. in Hmong – Guest: U. Vang, Program Manager at CUC Inc., and Bhong Vang, Tornado Survivor and Investigator for Minneapolis Civil Rights.
- April 15 and May 27 at 7:30 p.m. in Somali – Guests: Hassan Ali Mohamed, Imam at Minneapolis Dawah Institute, and Naima Ahmad, Community Member and Tornado Survivor.

ECHO’s mission is to collaborate with di- verse communities to deliver programs and services that help communities to increase self-tributes, and succeed. Visit elmominneapolis.org for more information.

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