

Taking history to heart - Black History Month - Herald-Times (Bloomington, IN) - February 1, 2005

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Tapping her fingernail on a glass display case in City Hall, Inger Nemcik pointed to a small, grainy portrait atop a dated newspaper clipping.

"See this guy right here, **Maceo Deal**, I know his grandson," she told Indiana University junior Alexis Joi Carter, a family friend.

One of many Bloomington African-Americans featured in black-and-white and sepia-toned photos and older stories, **Deal** once worked at the Showers Bros. Furniture Co. in the very building now housing City Hall.

The display joined award- winners Banneker History Project and the IU/African-American experience timeline in reminding guests at the city's first annual kickoff of Black History Month of local black history.

"I think I've seen more cohesiveness in the community," Nemcik said of progress she's observed in her two decades in Bloomington. These days, she sees more and more local events that bring together people from different cultures, she said.

Events throughout Black History Month will have a decidedly local flair to bring out city and Monroe County players and triumphs otherwise lost to time. Among those, performers such as Carter — who will sing Saturday at the Buskirk-Chumley Theatre — are building a bridge to the future.

To hear the resounding voice of 13-year-old Isaac Brown — one that extended well beyond the Bedford boy's years — was to glimpse that future.

Brown's solo performance of "His Eye is on the Sparrow" prompted spontaneous bursts of applause and verbal encouragement from the well over 100 people who squeezed into City Hall's atrium. When the member of Second Baptist Church's Kingdom Kids Choir concluded, the house jumped to its feet in standing ovation.

It was part of an hourlong program. Emceed by William Vance Jr., president of the Monroe County Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the ceremony featured a discussion by Betty Bridgwaters on the history of local black residents.

Mayor Mark Kruzan also spoke, promising to make issues for people of color a priority and to observe black history year-round. And there were performances from the full complement of Kingdom Kids Choir members.

Local historian Bridgwaters recounted everything from early settlement to land ownership to jobs

— like those at Showers Bros., which was known as a reliable employer for blacks. At times, she pointed to visual displays like the IU timeline. (On it were the likes of Harvey Young, the first black person admitted to IU in 1882, and Mike Davis, the first black men's basketball coach, hired in 2001.)

Her stories stretched from before the Civil War to prior to the mid-20th-century civil rights movement. With a distinctly local flavor, they weren't the normal textbook fare.

"Our hair was done after hours or in our homes," she said, drawing from historical accounts. Like white business owners, local black beauty shop proprietors until around the mid-1900s were pressured to limit black customers to avoid loss of business.

What's next?

For more Black History Month events, visit www.bloomington.in.gov/safe/blackhistorymonth.

Monday night's Black History Month kickoff was coordinated by the city with help from various city commissions, and groups. Among those involved were the city's Safe and Civil City Program, Black History Month Steering Committee, Indiana University Office of Academic Support and Diversity, Second Baptist Church, and the Monroe County NAACP chapter.

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