



SOMEWHERE IN TAKOMA DC

Forgotten sculpture memorializes African-American struggle

Tucked away behind the houses on Whittier Street NW between 4th Street and 5th Street is an unusual piece of sculpture – a metal rendition of a raised hand, standing in an open space at the center of the block used by the neighbors as a garden. The dark-colored, strongly contoured sculpture left in this hidden location is a story that helps explain the need for Black History Month.

The sculpture dates back to 1968, as part of the massive effort to organize the weeks-long Poor People’s Campaign on the Mall in Washington, DC.

The man responsible for commissioning the sculpture was Vincent deForest, a leader in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). He intended it to be the centerpiece of a historical mural celebrating the African American struggle for civil rights. As envisioned by Mr. deForest, the hand would be displayed against a curved background of panels, each capturing an aspect of that struggle. Then it would become a traveling exhibit – there were even plans to take it to the Democratic Convention.

Although the mural was erected on the Mall as part of “Resurrection City,” the hand sculpture was not yet in place when the police tore down the entire encampment. The sculpture remained in the deForest yard for 30 years, until the family moved away. Left behind, the statute now occupies the open green space across from the old house.

Few people, even the nearest neighbors, remember why it is there.

When Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, SCLC and others were faced with continuing the Poor People’s Campaign that King had launched the previous summer.

Mr. deForest wanted to use art to tell the story of African American history. “Artists are always the visionaries in social movements, and this was a way for them to contribute what they do best,” he explains.

Working on the campaign prompted him to move his family to DC. He quickly narrowed his house search to Takoma DC. Why? “It had the diversity I was looking for and I fit in.” He attributes much of that sense to the efforts of Neighbors Inc., a homeowners group organized a decade earlier to stop the racial fearmongering of block-busting.

Desegregation in the 1950s prompted DC whites to desert the city. Marvin Caplan formed Neighbors Inc, east of Rock Creek Park to battle “real estate interests, city officials, and the ambivalence of our own natures in an attempt to create a genuinely integrated community.” It served as a counterpoint to the existing neighborhood associations which refused to admit black residents.

Mr. deForest believes it “created a network of residents who rallied behind their particular interest of bringing together diversity and deliberately fostered the kind



PHOTO: JULIE WIATT

This dramatic sculpture is a startling sight, hidden away down an alley in Takoma DC.

a diverse community.” Or, as he spells it, “comm-unity.”

The first protestors from the Poor People’s Campaign arrived in DC on May 11. Over the summer, as many as 7,000 protestors camped on the National Mall trying to force economic concessions. Then on June 19, the police moved in and tore down Resurrection City, carting everything away, including the mural.

Knowing the historic value of the exhibit, Mr. deForest took a truck to Ft. Belvoir military base where all the debris had been hauled and managed to rescue the pieces of the display. He still has them in safekeeping and dreams of someday resurrecting the exhibit.

This is part of Mr. deForest’s bigger dream of establishing a national network of landmarks and other historically significant sites and exhibits that memorialize the African American history.

In the 1970s, when the nation began focusing on the Bicentennial, Mr. deForest



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BANNEKER INSTITUTE

Vincent deForest (right) talks with actor Bill Grimette at a Banneker Society historical reenactment in 2003.

saw an opportunity to raise awareness of black history.

Historic places, persons and events were identified, but Mr. deForest remembers, "African American landmarks were not part of the inventory. They were not recognized by the country as being important." Of the 1500 sites identified for national recognition, only four had significance to African Americans.

He countered with the African American Bicentennial. Among other things, it began the tradition of re-enacting Frederick Douglas' Fourth of July speech (given on the Fifth of July). Over the years, many leading actors, including James Earl Jones, stood in for Douglas.

Joining the National Park Service, Mr. deForest spearheaded a concerted effort to preserve African American landmarks such as the Frederick Douglas home and the school building connected with Brown v. Board of Education. Now retired and living in St. Louis with his wife Catherine, his current focus is the Underground Railroad. "It brings together both African

American and Native American heritage."

Along the way he has worked with the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, based at Howard University. He served as narrator for the segment of their documentary, *Freedom's Song*, describing the Poor People's Campaign.

"The issues of poverty are still with us today. Look at Katrina. History recycles itself. But it doesn't mean anything to the generations behind us, unless we find effective and creative ways to put history in context," he says.

And once again he ponders the possibilities for the metal sculpture of a hand that remains on the open space behind Whittier and Fourth in Takoma DC. Perhaps it could be moved to a more prominent location or end up as a Smithsonian exhibit.

Diana Kohn is Education Chair of Historic Takoma, Inc., dedicated to helping preserve the heritage of Takoma Park, MD and Takoma, DC. Historic Takoma is

currently renovating a building at Takoma Junction to serve as the new home for its archives. More information, including how to join, can be found at www.historictakoma.org.

More columns in the Takoma Archives series are available online at www.takoma.com, under "Features" and then "Takoma Archives."

The Association for the Study of African-American Life and History, is based at Howard University. *Freedom's Song*, the DVD mentioned above, is available for free by contacting www.asalh.org. Additional materials including an educational guide and timeline accompany the DVD. ASALH also has an extensive collection of Black History Month materials that can be ordered from the same website.



Spring in Takoma Park promises to be a time for art, music and poetry

The Takoma Park Arts and Humanities Commission will be in "full bloom" this Spring with projects, partnerships and opportunities to engage "creative types" from all over the city. For those unfamiliar with the Commission, it serves in an official advisory role to the Takoma Park City Council to promote, coordinate and strengthen public programs that further cultural development of the community. Come out and participate in the Arts in Takoma Park this Spring.

Vote for Art Project: Takoma Park raises consciousness through public art

The Arts & Humanities Commission, in partnership with the Center for the New American Dream, the Takoma Voice, and the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, invite children, youth and adults to design and create "new" campaign slogans about social issues and causes they care about at the city's Spring 2007 Public Art Project entitled: **Vote For Art**. Blank signs and art supplies will be provided to the first 100 participants. The event, designed to promote the arts and advocacy, will take place on **Saturday, March 3, 2007 from 1 PM to 3 PM at Heffner Park Community Center on 42 Oswego Avenue, Takoma Park, Maryland.**

"In November, you would drive around the community and election signs were everywhere," said Emily Palus, Vice Chair of the Commission. "The idea was that it might be fun to use those resources to express the creativity of residents."

"We encourage people to come out, express themselves through art and create their own political campaigns," said Jose Dominguez, Commission Chair. "This is a celebration of

the arts and advocacy that are the very cornerstones of Takoma Park."

Prizes will be awarded in categories that include:

- *Best Junk Mail Sign:* A sign made of/or about stopping junk mail
- *Best Commercialism Sign:* A sign promoting more fun and less stuff
- *Best Clean Energy/Global Warming Sign:* A sign promoting alternative fuels
- *Best Coordinated Series:* Awarded to the group that organizes most effectively around a common theme or issue
- *Most Newsworthy Sign*

Art supplies will be provided and the final designs will be revealed on neighborhood lawns throughout Takoma Park on March 13, 2007. The day was chosen due to its national significance as **Arts Advocacy Day**, which aims to bring together cultural and civic groups nationwide. For more information contact Sara Daines at 301-891-7224 or email: AHC@takomagov.org.

Free Concert: Award-winning flutist performs in Takoma prior to European competition

The ghosts of John Cage and Martha Graham will fill The Culture Shop in Takoma Park as flutist Carrie Rose presents an evening of new music and performance on **March 10 at 8 PM at The Culture Shop** at 341 Cedar St NW, Washington, DC.

The performance will include pieces where she dances, sings and whispers while she plays. Some of the pieces also incorporate poetry.

Admission is free and open to the public, but reservations are required as space is limited. A reception will follow the performance. RSVP to 301-608-9637 by March 2.

"Most of my pieces are theatrical in nature," says Ms. Rose, who has lived in the Long

Branch neighborhood for more than 6 years. "When I was young, teachers tried in vain to get me to stop dancing while I play. Now, I intentionally dance while playing and also include singing, poetry, and text."

The performance will be a "tune-up" of sorts. In April, she travels to Amsterdam to compete in the International Gaudeamus Interpreters Competition, an international new music competition for all instruments. She has chosen to showcase American composers, including works by Robert Erickson, Stuart Saunders Smith, Ton de Leeuw, Kees von Baaran, Mario Lavista, Christian Wolff, and Claude Debussy.

This presentation is a partnership between the Old Town Business Association, The Culture Shop and the Takoma Park Arts & Humanities Commission.

Art exhibitions and poetry readings brighten up Takoma Park Community Center.

Ever since the Community Center opening in December 2005, paintings and other art expressions have graced the walls of **Takoma Park's Community Center**. Exhibitions Coordinator Stephanie Ney is seeking to showcase a different local artistic talent each month. In addition, a reception honors the artist and provides a chance for a dialog about the processes of art.

Stop by during city business hours (8:30 a.m.-10 p.m. weekdays, 10-6 on Saturdays, 2-6 p.m. on Sundays). February's featured artist is Ann Riley. A reception for her will be held February 9 from 7-9 PM.

Meanwhile, the third Thursday of the month has been proclaimed Poetry Night. A project of **Don Berger, Takoma Park's first Poet Laureate**, the evening features several local poets reading their own work.

Search underway for new Takoma Park Poet Laureate

Don Berger finishes up his two-year stint at the end of June. The Arts and Humanities Commission is **seeking nominations** (including self-nominations) for his successor. There are two basic criteria: the poet laureate must be a published poet and a Takoma Park resident.

Along with a curriculum vitae (including list of publications) and three samples of their poetry, a cover letter should identify a project the candidate would pursue over the two-year term to expand the community's awareness and interest in poetry. Application packets are due by last Monday in March, and can be submitted to the Commission at the following address:

Takoma Park Arts & Humanities Commission
c/o Sara Anne Daines
7600 Maple Avenue
Takoma Park MD 20912

"Spring for Poetry": Celebrate National Poetry Month

The Friends of Takoma Park Library, in conjunction with the Arts and Humanities Commission and Columbia Union College, plan to highlight National Poetry Month by creating the first-ever **Takoma Park Poetry Walk**. As Ann Slayton explains, "We will promote poetry by posting poems on signs along well-traveled streets and parks in the city. Each poem will be less than 20 lines, so it can be easily read."

The poems will include those by known as well as lesser-known poets of the Americas, chosen to reflect the diversity of themes, poetic styles and ethnic interests. Meanwhile, the library will encourage interest in those poets by offering more samples of the featured poets.