

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Lee County Black History Society kicks off Capital Campaign**

FORT MYERS, Fla. (Aug. 30, 2021) – The Lee County Black History Society has officially kicked off a capital campaign to raise $22 million for a Black Culture Center at Clemente Park in Dunbar.

As part of the City of Fort Myers’ comprehensive plan for Clemente Park, residents have expressed their desire for the construction of a Black Cultural Center in the expansive urban green space available.

“We envision this as a state-of-the-art cultural center, that will be a place for both blacks and non-blacks to come and experience and learn about the African American history, art and culture.  By bringing awareness to our African American culture, we hope to build a stronger community and a better relationship with others,” said Teresa Watkins Brown, Fort Myers City Councilmember, Ward 1.

Watkins Brown recently kicked off the funding of the capital campaign by donating $25,000.

“It will be a place that we can utilize art and music, but also display a place not just for us in this community, but tourists traveling here,” said Charles Barnes, Chairman of the Lee County Black History Society. “There's always talk about growth and development throughout the City of Fort Myers, but do we get those eyes into our community to see what we’re all about as a people.”

Barnes said for the center to become reality, $22 million would need to be raised to move forward and they are looking at multiple funding sources. Community leaders like Councilmember Watkins Brown and local architect Ted Sottong have already stepped up.

“As you're coming down Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, you're going to see it off in the distance and it doesn't look like anything else around it,” said Ted Sottong, the local architect who has produced initial plans and renderings for the Cultural Center.

The first floor of the Cultural Center would include an art gallery with large glass windows that would showcase the gallery to both pedestrians and vehicle traffic. The second floor is a community space for events and performances and the third floors will include music studios where local residents can come in and produce music or podcasts or photography.

“This is a project that we should get behind. We need to do our best to fund it because it’s a project that’s important to the entire city. It is an investment in the city, in our youth, and in our future,” said Kevin Anderson, mayor of the City of Fort Myers.

The Lee County Black History Society, Inc., a 501C(3) organization, was founded in 1994 by Janice Cass. Ms. Cass’s objectives for establishing the LCBHS, Inc. was to provide a way for African-Americans in Lee County to recognize and celebrate Black History Month, as well as creating a Black History Museum in Fort Myers. The Society aims to preserve and commemorate the cultural and educational contributions by both locally and nationally known Black people.

“What we have been able to do through the Black History organization and the Williams Academy Black History Museum is bringing attention to that deficit within the culture,” said Cass. “With an expansion, that will be a great opportunity for young artists, young musicians, people to have a place where they can demonstrate and showcase their talents.”

View the Black Culture Center’s presentation at [https://www.dropbox.com/s/jww62apq7lwdoik/1Final%20Video%20Presentation%20-%20Black%20Culture%20Center%20-%207.30.21.mp4?dl=0](https://na01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dropbox.com%2Fs%2Fjww62apq7lwdoik%2F1Final%2520Video%2520Presentation%2520-%2520Black%2520Culture%2520Center%2520-%25207.30.21.mp4%3Fdl%3D0&data=04%7C01%7C%7C619aa73661104163235d08d953968039%7C84df9e7fe9f640afb435aaaaaaaaaaaa%7C1%7C0%7C637632728120601006%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=NaITsUeOClkcI%2FyNB0kecWnMalX%2F0Y5oYYfwNGI8nxw%3D&reserved=0)

Currently, the LCBHC operates the Williams Academy Black History Museum at Clemente Park. The museum was opened in January 2001 and is the 1942 addition to the original building. It is one of the few early twentieth-century wood frame schoolhouses still standing in Lee County. The original Williams Academy built-in 1912 was Lee County’s first government-funded school for black (‘colored’) students. The school was named after J. S. Williams, Supervisor of the Colored Schools. The Black students throughout Lee County and Punta Gorda attended school at the academy.

The museum was restored following state and national preservation and restoration standards. The building is divided into two rooms. One room displays historical memorabilia of local black citizens and the history and culture of the black community. The other room is an interactive classroom staged as a 1940’s segregated southern classroom for ‘colored’ students. It provides a visual contrast to the facilities provided to white students. One of the chief purposes of the Williams Academy Black History Museum is to provide educational opportunities to citizens of Lee County and surrounding areas.

Black History Month, Legends Gala, Juneteenth and Holiday in the Park are events presented each year by LCBHS through their partnerships with other community-based organizations, churches and private citizens.

To support the campaign, donations can be mailed or dropped off to Lee County Black History Society at 1936 Henderson Avenue, Fort Myers, FL 33916. For more information, call 239-332-8778, email blackhistory@leecountyblackhistorysociety.org or visit leecountyblackhistorysociety.org

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Contact: Melinda Isley, APR, m.creativepr, cell: 239-565-1630, melinda@mcreativepr.com