

King exploring all corners of central Illinois for African-American history

For a month in high school in the middle of summer, Douglas King traded life in St. Louis for Paris, Illinois.

It was a stark contrast, leaving a bustling, urban environment for a rural one that housed one percent of the population King was used to. But he gained valuable insight to a different lifestyle, one where you didn't have to lock your door at night. Now, King is taking that approach of exploring new areas when curating the Springfield and Central Illinois African-American History Museum, and it's paying off in a big way.



In a way where King has more than the museum can house.

“People ask us, ‘How’s the museum doing?’ And I tell them, we’re doing great,” King said. “I tell them, we’re running so fast, we’re about to catch up with ourselves.”

Part of the reason King has plenty to discover is the idea he’s put forward with the museum – a place that can tell the stories from Quincy to Danville, from Peoria to Alton. There’s plenty of history in Springfield thanks to a man called Abraham Lincoln, but King’s looking to provide a museum that showcases all kinds of stories.

Currently renting a building just outside Oak Ridge Cemetery, there’s a spacious room housing original photography taken in Springfield, paintings, quilts, and other items showing African-American history across Illinois.

And while it’s fun to learn about those who were connected with a former president, some of the most incredible stories happened further away from bigger cities. Near the banks of the Mississippi in the heart of Pike County, King heard a story about a city he didn’t even know existed – New Philadelphia.

Back in the 1830s, Frank McWhorter, an enslaved man who purchased his freedom and several members of his family, left Kentucky and traveled to Pike County. He bought several plots of land and became the first once-enslaved African-American, and possibly free, to incorporate a township. That became New Philadelphia. By selling some of the other plots of land within the town, McWhorter was able to save more and free more family members from Kentucky.

“The birth records aren’t complete, but we think over the course of time, 17 families’ freedoms were purchased. Just a fascinating story,” King said.

McWhorter’s story and legacy is just one in the current museum. There’s plenty to look at, but King is thinking bigger. In an effort to help build up funds to purchase their own building, King helped set up an organization fund, the Springfield and Central Illinois African-American History Museum Fund. King, a founding board member when the Community Foundation was established, has seen first-hand the impact the foundation can bring.

“I know personally the impact that’s going to have on us is very, very positive,” King said. “They’ve done a heck of a job of taking your money, investing it wisely and making it grow. And that’s what we’re looking for. This is the money that we could use to purchase our facility. In the meantime, it may allow us to expand where we are now.”

King’s seen visitors come in from Australia, Italy, South Africa, and other places around the world. While at the beginning, King didn’t know how big the African-American History Museum could be. Now with the number of exhibits and visitors, there’s a clearer and bigger vision of what can be accomplished.

“We’re not even scratching the surface, we’re just rubbing it,” King said.

For more information on establishing an organization fund, please contact the Community Foundation at 217.789.4431 or visit CFL.org.