

'Rhythm of HBCUs' starts Feb. 18

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Wright



Anderson

What began last year as a one-day event to celebrate Black History Month has been expanded into three days' worth of activities that will serve several purposes, two of which are to highlight El Dorado and to promote education by saluting historically black colleges and universities.

"Rhythm of HBCUs: Right Here at Home - A Teachable Moment in Our History" is slated for Feb. 18, 19, and 20 at the El Dorado Conference Center.

The event is sponsored by The Quilted History with help from the El Dorado Ministerial Alliance and several local churches, businesses and individuals.

Inaugural banquet

The Quilted History Awards Banquet will honor Dr. Michele Wright of Little Rock, musician Ron McMillon and Dr. Claud Anderson.

The honorees will receive the 2016 "Rhythm of Life Award" for their contributions to African American history and achievement.

Wright is a senior executive with several pharmaceutical and biotech companies and associations, including the National Biotechnology & Pharmaceutical Association, Pathology Partners, LLC, and Curazene Biotechnology Company.

NBPA is a non-profit professional membership organization for blacks in the life sciences and pharmaceutical industry.

Williams said Wright has a background in industrial and electrical engineering.

McMillon, a Colorado native, is a musician who has been playing the saxophone for more than 20 years.

He is known for a mix of gospel and smooth jazz and released his first "gospel jazz" single, "Is it Me," in 2013.

McMillon's new gospel album, "Talkin' About Jesus," is slated to drop in the spring.

A noted author, speaker and entrepreneur, Anderson led President Jimmy Carter's presidential campaign in Florida and was later appointed by Carter as the Federal Chairman for a commission of governors of southeast states.

In that position, which ranked as assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Commerce, Anderson stimulated and funded economic development projects for the governors in the states he represented.

He is president of PowerNomics Corporation of America, Inc., and The Harvest Institute, Inc.

PowerNomics is a package of principles and strategies that explain "race" and offer a guide for Black America to become a more self-sufficient and economically competitive group in the U.S.

The Harvest Institute is a nationally recognized think tank that specializes in research, policy development, education and advocacy to increase the self-sufficiency of Black America.

Anderson is the author of several books that are used as the foundation for Harvest Institute programs and as text books in several high schools and colleges across the country.

Anderson will also serve as guest speaker for a portion of "Rhythm," Williams said.

Expanding the event

In February 2015, Carolyn Williams, director/ curator of The Quilted History

— a nonprofit organization and museum that showcases artifacts and other historical pieces that African American heritage and culture —, presented "A Night of History" at the conference center to commemorate Black History Month.

Held on Friday, the day was broken up into two segments

— 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. and 6 until 8 p.m. — that were jam-packed with an exhibition by The Quilted History, prayers, recitations, inspirational messages, and musical performances by individuals and groups that included the Grambling (Louisiana) State University Choir.

Williams said the event was well attended and enthusiastically received by the community

— a response that informed plans turn the event into an annual celebration, expand it and refine the theme.

"It was such a success. All day long, people were in and out. The schools came out, Retta Brown (Elementary), Strong ... Everyone really enjoyed it," Williams said.

With the tight schedule afforded by just one day, Williams said she wanted more of the community and more out-of-town visitors and guests to have an opportunity to participate.

So this year, more activities have been added to the program, and they will be spread over three days.

"Rhythm of HBCUs" will feature five HBCU choirs from four states, a banquet and notable speakers from around the state and country.

In addition to an exhibit by The Quilted History, The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff University Museum and Cultural Center will also display pieces from its collection.

"It's an effort to highlight the significance of HBCUs. I always want to promote education, so it's refreshing to not only talk about, but to let them see it and experience it," Williams said.

"Last year, I had just one choir, Grambling, to come. It was hard to get more schools to come for a oneday event, and I thought, if it was such a success with one choir, why not five HBCUs?" she continued.

Williams reached out to HBCUs far and wide for the 2015 event and got firm — and eager — commitments from the choirs of UAPB, Alcorn State University (Lorman, Mississippi); Mississippi Valley State University (Itta Bena, Mississippi); Southern University (Baton Rouge); and Tuskegee University (Tuskegee, Alabama), whose famed Golden Voices Concert Choir is known for its stirring renditions of traditional spirituals.

The award-winning choir has also performed all over the country, on national television and at notable events, including the opening of Radio City Music Hall in 1932.

Williams said word about "Rhythm" has circulated among the HBCU choir circuit, and three more HBCUs from Mississippi, Texas and Florida have already committed for 2017.

"That's fantastic to know that other people have heard about it because these choir directors know each other and word spreads," she said, adding that many of the HBCUs she contacted responded favorably because they are looking to boost community outreach efforts.

"I was thinking about what I could do, and it seemed impossible. Then I said my prayers and started pushing the buttons on the phone. Tuskegee was the first one to accept," Williams said.

A representative from each university and South Arkansas Community College, who operates and maintains the El Dorado Conference Center in a partnership with the city, will speak to the audience about goings-on and happenings at their respective schools, she said.

Showcasing El Dorado

Once she nailed down the theme for "Rhythms" and booked the speakers and HBCU choirs, Williams turned to the community for help.

She submitted a funding request to the El Dorado Advertising and Promotion Commission and was awarded \$1,500 to help promote the event.

Williams said Bishop George Calloway, pastor of St. James Baptist Church and newly appointed member of the El Dorado Works Board, and the Ministerial Alliance were instrumental in coordinating local churches to assist with the different components that go into organizing a large event, such as providing lunch for the students in the HBCU choirs.

Local businesses have also contributed in various ways, including donating money and items for door prizes, Williams said.

The willingness of everyone to help is a testament to the community spirit that helps to define El Dorado

— and serves as a marketing tool for the city, she said.

"This is what you do for home. This is something that crosses all barriers and shows who and what El Dorado is made of," she said.

Williams said she has received calls from people all over Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and other places who are interested in attending "Rhythms."

She said the event is a promotional vehicle for the entire South Arkansas community, for which El Dorado serves as the central location.

"My goal is not just to showcase El Dorado, but also to showcase the people. We have just as much to offer as anyone else," Williams said. "If you can't sell yourself, who else is going to sell you?"

Rhythms will be held from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. on Feb. 18 and 19 and from 1 until 4 p.m. on Feb. 20.

The Alcorn and Southern choirs will perform at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Feb. 18; Mississippi Valley and UAPB on the Feb. 19; and Tuskegee on Feb. 20.

Most of the activities of "Rhythms" are free and open to the public. The banquet is the only paid activity on the program.

The banquet will begin at 6 p.m. on Feb. 20. Tickets are \$20, and they may be purchased in advance or at the door.

Williams encouraged those who wish to attend the banquet to either purchase or reserve them in advance.

For more information or to purchase tickets, call Williams at (870) 881-0443 or send an email to preciousmw@gmail.com.