Celebrating Black History Month in Round Rock, Texas

2008 -2012

The Round Rock Black History Organization (RRBHO) supports the annual Black History Month events during the month of February and the Juneteenth Celebration in June.  The mission of the Round Rock Black History Organization is to educate the citizens of Round Rock and Williamson County, Texas, about the contributions of African Americans to the culture of central Texas and the United States. It does this through programs, celebrations, and other means developed by the Board of Directors.

The Round Rock Black History Organization has worked diligently over the past five years to provide Round Rock with community enrichment programs that preserve history, promote diversity and encourage fellowship. The RRBHO includes representatives from Baha’i of Round Rock, Good Hope Baptist Church, One Way Baptist Church, City of Round Rock, St. Paul AME Church, Sweet Home Baptist Church, The Voice, Inc., The Williamson Museum, and the Williamson County African American Chamber of Commerce.

 The Black History Month events originated when the City of Round Rock was approached by Mrs. Jessie Mercer Carson with Sweet Home Baptist Church in 2008 to host a traveling exhibition featuring the Tuskegee Airmen. The Round Rock Public Library was selected to host the exhibition and Sweet Home Baptist Church was the sponsor. For many years, the City did not formally acknowledge or celebrate Black History Month. Bringing the *Charles Alfred “Chief” Anderson Tuskegee Airman* exhibition from Tuskegee, Alabama to Round Rock, Texas would be the first step in a new tradition that provides quality programming that honors the accomplishments of African Americans, educates the community and introduces young people to history during Black History Month.

 Over the past five years, the single Black History Month exhibition has developed into a series of events across Williamson County, Texas. The informal partnership between the Round Rock Public Library and Sweet Home Baptist Church has expanded into a formal RRBHO with pending 501(c) 3 status. The series of events hosted by the RRBHO follows the National Black History Month Themes from the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, but adds a local history component. For example, the 2012 national theme was Black Women in American Culture and History. The RRBHO recognized the many contributions of local women in a photography exhibition entitled: *Black Women of Round Rock in History and Culture.*

The 2012 program line-up included: 25th Annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Walk & Celebration on January 14th; Texas State University – Round Rock Campus MLK Celebration on January 31st; two art gallery openings on February 2nd; Black History Month Celebration featuring Austin Community College on February 4th; film screening of “The Help” on February 7th; 3rd Annual Sweetheart Banquet on February 11th; Historic Bus Tour, “A Journey Down 79”, from Round Rock to Taylor, Texas on February 18th; and Round Rock Independent School District Black History Month Celebration and Awards Ceremony on February 26th. The Black History Month events strengthen the community by educating citizens about the history and achievements of African American women in Round Rock. All of the organizations involved shared the goal of improving the quality of life for Round Rock residents, educating citizens, and building community through community events celebrating the city’s diversity. Events included participants from the ages of 5 to 98 years old. "It's incredibly important because the people who are alive today hold great history that they can share with young people," explained Pamela Cotton, Vice President of the RRBHO.

Because the population of Round Rock has grown so much over the past few years, it is important that we preserve the history as well as organize events that educate the public about the history of Round Rock, Texas. According to the Texas Historical Commission, in less than 25 years, the population of Round Rock has grown from 12,000 residents to over 100,000 residents. This population trend is projected to continue, making it is more important than ever to preserve the past and to educate the newest citizens for the future. Educating newcomers helps make them a part of the community. Black History Month events help longtime residents get to know some of the newest citizens and to view them as respectful and curious about the past, rather than simply people bringing an unwelcome change. The programs help promote understanding and fellowship among all Round Rock residents.

The RRBHO partnered with local businesses to sponsor these events and took in monetary and in-kind donations. Seven of the nine events were free and open to the public. Ticket fees were charged for the Bus Tour ($10 per person) and the Sweetheart Banquet ($25/35 single/couple) to cover expenses. Through collaboration, partnership, and countless community volunteers, the 2012 Black History Month events garnered praise from the media and attendees, paved the way for new partnerships, and strengthened the sense of community among Round Rock residents.

The events were widely publicized and were featured in various local media outlets including: Austin American Statesman newspaper – Wilco Wired Blog on January 30, 2012; Austin American Statesman newspaper, Thursday, February 2, 2012 Community Briefing Section featured the Round Rock Black History Month Program Line-Up; Community Impact Newspaper; Round Rock Leader, Facebook and Twitter; KTBC – TV (FOX 7 Austin, February 6, 2012) “Round Rock Honors African American Women”. The story featured the Round Rock Black History Month Photography Exhibition titled: “Portraits: Black Women of Round Rock in History and Culture”. President of the Round Rock Black History Organization Jessie Mercer Carson, Vice-President Pamela Cotton and Adult Services Librarian Kate Jarboe were interviewed for this story.

 While residents enjoyed distinct programs in 2012 to celebrate Black History Month, some events were more unique and therefore, better attended than others. Our focus in the future will be to emphasize quality over quantity and invest resources and energy on programs that have been consistently successful. These include the MLK Walk, the Historic Bus Tour, the Art Gallery Exhibition and the Sweetheart Banquet. By focusing on these already successful, public events we hope to make them even more visible to the community and increase participation.