

Stages of Freedom Museum Celebrates African American History



The Stages of Freedom Museum had its grand opening on July 20, and I was so proud to be a part of this educational and enriching event. When a new museum opens its doors in Providence, it's a special occasion. This museum is filled with lots and lots of African American history, and it's free and open to the public. I sat down with Executive Director Ray Rickman, and he brought me up to speed on the idea, the mission and great work (in progress) ahead of them.

How did this idea begin? There are two reasons Ray told me. One, to promote black culture for the entire community. He noted when the black community is fully understood, everything will be better among all diversities and cultures. Two, swim empowerment, which means removing barriers so that African American children in Rhode Island can learn to swim proficiently.



Ray educated me on the lack of swimming among black youth. He said black children and teens (5 to 14 years of age) are five times more likely to drown than white children, not only in this country but the world. This is an alarming statistic. According to Ray, the African American community in general doesn't know how to swim, is not connected to anyone who can swim and does not have the financial ability to learn how to swim. Ray told me of a woman who lost her son due to drowning and she reached out to him for assistance with her son's burial and looked to

him for a commitment to change this plight. Ray vowed he would make a difference *and* is well on his way on keeping his promise. This year, Stages of Freedom will spend money raised through the sale of their books on teaching several children how to swim in communities across the state. Ray said it will take time, the but the effort will be life changing.



The museum name was created by Robb Dimmick, the program director, using words from Frederick Douglass: "We are on a journey to Freedom." The museum's mission: 1). To educate and empower inner-city youth by providing cultural opportunities and access to museums and live performance. 2). To build community by creating and providing programming about black Rhode Island life and culture to a wide audience. 3). To provide youth of color access to swimming programs in order to reduce the number of drownings in the black community. The space is filled with books for sale, creative artworks, furniture and more. There are speaking programs and scheduled events. Plans have already begun on large educational panels on The Black Church of Rhode Island. These are currently traveling to colleges across the state. The gallery space also



showcases historic books, writings and artifacts.

Exhibits will be quarterly, and a Frederick Douglass exhibition is in the works. There is ample space in the Merchants Bank building that will eventually be unveiling more objects and relics. Displays by local artists are also in the works and theme-related subjects are being finalized. There is additional event space that will

host Freedom Factor, a salon of African American arts and ideas. I love this space and what it stands for; there are so many interesting things I learned in speaking with Ray and I encourage everyone to stop in, listen, learn and contribute to the community.

Stages of Freedom Museum, 10 Westminster St, PVD; 401-421-0606; StagesofFreedom.org

Operating hours:

Monday thru Friday 10am - 6pm; Saturday thru Sunday Noon - 5pm