

Cultural center missing something bigger

To the Editor:

It has been almost five years since the Harold Washington Cultural Center opened its doors, and my excitement over it has diminished. Each time I pass this magnificent building I am reminded of the lack of inclusion. It seems African Americans are the only people who use it.

Ideas about how to run the center are not coming from a wide variety of participants, which threatens the success of it. I must voice my concerns. I cannot take it anymore.

It is hard to believe that this center, built to honor the late Harold Washington, our first elected black mayor, stands on the corner of 47th Street and King Drive to benefit Ald. Dorothy Tillman, her friends and her family. What about the citizens of the 3rd Ward?

Initiating and supporting programs to lift up the community should be first on the alderman's agenda. Harold Washington and Lou Rawls both would turn over in their graves if they knew the center's purpose had so little to do with helping the people of the 3rd Ward. I believe the Harold Washington Cultural Center is missing something bigger.

Everyone knows the alderman controls what happens in the cultural center through her self-appointed, not-for-profit Tobacco Road Inc. Community groups have absolutely no say in the programming and vision of the cultural center. Leaders like myself can provide a number of creative ideas for the community center, or we can help to recruit others who have the real know-how.

Tillman represents business as usual — Chicago machine politics at the expense of Harold Washington's legacy. Community leaders with dreams for the facility are powerless and absent a voice, perhaps forever.

There is a real history lesson in what the cultural center is supposed to represent for the



A statue of Harold Washington stands in front of his namesake cultural center.

letter to the editor

people of the South Side. This 1,000-seat auditorium is located at a real, as well as figurative, crossroads of Bronzeville: 47th and King.

During earlier years there was a lot to do and much to see. Gerri's Palm Tavern, the Savoy, South Center Shopping Mall, the Regal and Metropolitan theaters, the Brown Derby and many other places were enjoyed by all. These businesses were located within minutes of this intersection. Entertainment and shopping were in the neighborhood. Venturing to other areas of the city for quality entertainment or shopping was almost unheard of. The bustling energy along 47th Street meant jobs and opportunities for the new northerners.

There was life in the steps of the poor and working class arrivals from the South. Better

and affordable housing just a few blocks west in the Rosenwald or Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments was available for middle-income residents. This evolution allowed for the co-existence of many who shared the wealth and excitement of the times.

The community was unified, with all members moving in the same direction, toward progress. At the Regal and other entertainment venues, everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, could participate. The common goal was to improve the quality of life for all of the Black Metropolis.

In the interest of progress, many residents became entrepreneurs and community leaders. Others, however, remained ordinary citizens who could share their stories, talents and experiences in a friendly, non-hostile place where everyone was the same. The Regal Theatre was the most famous because everybody could afford to partake in the culture of the times.

Ironically, the Harold Washington Cultural Center sits almost exactly where the Regal Theatre once stood. I believe the cultural center should preserve our legacy and the importance of our sameness.

I imagine that African Americans of Bronzeville in the 1940s wanted to share an ever-evolving spirit. People had a vision for

their community and they had a number of places and forums to share their concerns whether through poetry, literature, art, music or discussions over a drink at Gerri's.

Those times and that period is much of what we have in Bronzeville today. Our alderman is not a visionary because if she was, she would be able to articulate how our past can readily represent our future.

We have a real opportunity for tourism and a destination stop to be enjoyed by all. But I am afraid that we are missing an opportunity to really establish our own existence and a real renaissance period — a true rebirth of our neighborhood. I believe the Harold Washington Cultural Center is the epitome of our renaissance and it is up to us to reclaim it.

I believe the cultural center and other such venues in our neighborhood have historical meaning and no one should deny us our future. Their mere existence indicates that these venues were put in place to bring people together. Anything associated with the cultural center that does not represent Harold's vision of community involvement and interest is a direct insult to every citizen of Bronzeville.

Just what is Tillman's vision for the cultural center? Why is the vision not obvious to the citizenry of the 3rd Ward? Can she and will she articulate her ideas for our future and include a variety of broad perspectives in the process? Does our alderman really have the capacity to merge our valuable past with our priceless future?

I wonder if common folks can actually afford to use the cultural center? I wonder if not-for-profit agencies have ever received a freebie from the Tillman clan who runs the center? How many residents or community groups can afford the cost of producing an affair there? I would venture to say that hardly anyone gets anything for free at the cultural center.

Unfortunately, under Dorothy Tillman's tutelage I am convinced the once Lou Rawls Theater serves only to divide us even further. You need big bucks, must be a major promotions company or a mega church or don't waste time calling "our" cultural center.

Mell Monroe

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