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Neighbors invited to serve as ambassadors of history in Victorian Village

By Barbara Bradley

Posted September 30, 2010 at 12:05 a.m.

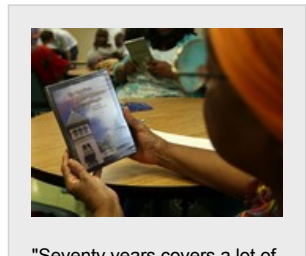
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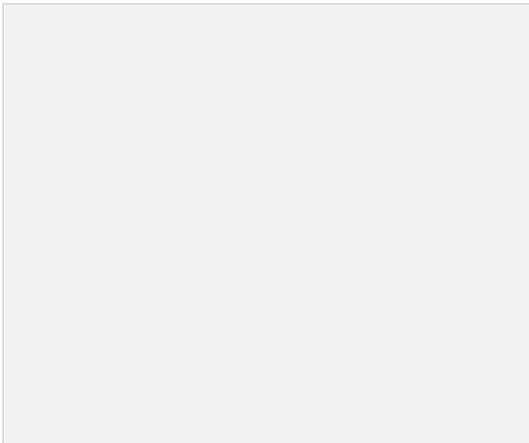
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Standing in front of the Woodruff-Fontaine House Museum, Scott Blake, executive director of the Community Development Corp. of Victorian Village, talks to Jefferson Square residents who will be training to serve as tour guides in the area.

Bernard Hughes is 62, has an outgoing personality, lives in subsidized housing near Victorian Village and hasn't worked in years. That makes him an excellent candidate for a new job as an ambassador.



Recently, Hughes and seven other ambassadors-in-training, all low-income tenants of Jefferson Square Apartments, combed the Woodruff-Fontaine House Museum, taking notes and shooting photos with their camera phones. Their teacher, museum director Peggy Lovell, couldn't have asked for more enthusiastic students.



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Seventy years covers a lot of territory," says Georgia King, 70, better known as Mother King, who is training to be a neighborhood ambassador. King was part of history herself as a civil rights activist.

By December, they hope to be wearing uniforms and walking Victorian Village as the vanguard of the city's first Neighborhood Ambassador Tour Guide Program.

The idea is simple.

At Victorian Village, too many visitors take the 2-minute tour, said Scott Blake, executive director of the Community Development Corp. of Victorian Village. They hang out their car window, snap photos and they're gone. They don't stay to explore inside the old mansions or dine at nearby restaurants.

So Blake and Randle Witherington, an associate professor who teaches interior design at the University of Memphis, hatched a plan:

Post friendly, uniformed tour guides outside the old mansions to tell tourists stories of the great families who once lived there and invite them inside. Let them lead sidewalk tours, creating visible activity on the streets and bringing the village's rich history to life.

Ideal guides would be older people who already live in the neighborhood in subsidized housing and who need the work. Because of their age and perhaps their health, some would be unemployable for a full-time job. But as neighborhood senior citizens, they would be well-suited to part-time jobs as authentic conveyors of history and as figures of trust and authority.

To further increase a sense of security in the neighborhood, they would carry walkie-talkies, checking in at various points along their route.

It's not that different a job for Carolyn Swanson, 52, who once worked as a security guard and docent at Memphis Brooks Museum of Art. "I didn't know how much I loved the arts" until then, she said. She recalls museum staffers who made the artwork fascinating to her. "I want to do that, too," she said.

Georgia King, 70, better known as "Mother King," is already walking the neighborhood in her prayer ministry. She prays with the homeless and directs them to places where they can get food and help. There is much she already knows about Memphis history. "Seventy years covers a lot of territory," she said.

The tour will start at the Woodruff-Fontaine House at 680 Adams, traverse parts of Washington, Orleans and Jefferson, and include sites such as the Mallory-Neely House, Juvenile Court, Collins Chapel Church, St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, the Lowenstein House, the Pillow-McIntyre House, the Wright Carriage House and Mollie Fontaine Lounge.

The guides will receive a stipend of \$8 an hour, approved through the Memphis Housing Authority, so it won't affect their income status for subsidized housing, said Blake. There will be one tour guide five days a week, and there are eight guides in the first class. The guides will undergo a 12-week course, meeting at different sites, with the aim of being on the street by early December.

Witherington is creating a curriculum, including a PowerPoint presentation on the houses and Memphis history, which he and U of M students will teach to the guides. Their efforts are part of the U of M's "engaged scholarship activities," which focus on working with nonprofits to strengthen neighborhoods, he said.

Examinations of the guides will be oral.



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36-Hour

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Currently
49°

Fog/Mist
Wind: N 7mph

Today
52°
42°

Fri
04:00 AM



Fog
Temp: 43°

Feels Like: 43°
Humidity: 92%
Precip: 0%

Fri
04:00 PM



Sunny
Temp: 57°

Feels Like: 57°
Humidity: 60%
Precip: 0%

Sat
04:00 AM



Partly Cloudy
Temp: 49°

Feels Like: 49°
Humidity: 86%
Precip: 0%

The ambassador program is funded for one year, and Blake is seeking other grants for another year. After that, he hopes it will be able to support itself through increased tourism revenue.

The project coincides with several developments: progress toward reopening the Mallory-Neely House and the creation of originalmemphis.com, a website designed to better showcase Memphis historical sites. Also Saturday, there will be a Victorian Village homecoming celebration with music, a picnic opportunity and a 5K run. Dignitaries will gather today for a public ceremony at Juvenile Court to mark its 100-year anniversary.

In June, a manager was hired for the Mallory-Neely House, a first step in reopening the 19th century mansion. The house and Magevney House, both city-owned, were closed in 2005 because of budget cuts. Woodruff-Fontaine is the only mansion open.

The city has provided a capital improvement project for \$300,000 to assess the condition of the roof and windows at Mallory-Neely and make repairs, said Wesley S. Creel, administrator of programs for the Pink Palace Family of Museums. He doesn't know when it will reopen, but, "We're on our way," he said. He hopes to have funding in the next fiscal year for the Magevney House.

Originalmemphis.org, created through the CDC of Victorian Village, is designed to become a tourism portal for all historical sites in Shelby County, said Blake. People eventually will be able to download free neighborhood tours to their phones or to play on a car CD player.

In the guide program curriculum, "There's a strong women's story behind the wealthy men that perpetuated the houses, a story about the arts in the city," Witherington said. Three women of Victorian Village, aided by the Nineteenth Century Club, played key roles in establishing many of Memphis' main art institutions, including the Memphis College of Art and the Brooks.

Of course there's a ghost story. Mollie Woodruff, eldest daughter of the home's builder Amos Woodruff, was married in the house and lived with her husband on the second floor. But her baby died, supposedly of yellow fever, and her husband died shortly afterward. Staff have reportedly seen her in her former bedroom, "the rose room," where she lost her baby.

Blake notes that historical sites located in blighted neighborhoods adjacent to assisted housing is a pattern replicated in many cities and elsewhere in Memphis. "It's the first time (the ambassador program) has been tried in the U.S.," he said. If it works here, it could help preserve architectural treasures and revitalize neighborhoods everywhere, he said.

Woodruff-Fontaine clearly was having an effect on Hughes, a former steel mill worker and forklift operator. "It's amazing how that architecture of that time is so unique and beautiful," he said, his eyes following the graceful flow of a three-story staircase. He had always been curious about the houses, but "today tripped me out," he said. "I like to talk to people," he said. "I can pass on what knowledge I have."

Some in the guide class already know what it's like to be a part of Memphis history. Mother King was a civil rights activist who, as a member of the local Southern Christian Leadership Conference, helped organize one of the marches in 1968 in support of the sanitation worker's strike. "We were up front. We helped lead the march," she said.

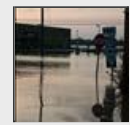
As a Victorian Village ambassador, King hopes to be up front again, helping lead a



Waterfall in McDonald's Drive-thru
5/5/10
12:42 p.m.



Road Washed-Out
5/3/10
1:30 p.m.



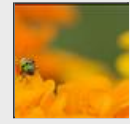
Arlington TN Flooding
5/1/10
6:53 p.m.



Arlington TN Flooding
5/1/10
6:53 p.m.



Arlington TN Flooding
5/1/10
6:53 p.m.



Untitled
4/30/10
10:23 a.m.

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NOV

NOV

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18

THURSDAY

19

FRIDAY

20

SATURDAY



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9 a.m.

Manassas High School

One Day Still Life Workshop with Sue Foell

9 a.m.

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once-fabulous neighborhood back to firmer ground.

– *Barbara Bradley*: 529-2370

Victorian Village homecoming and Juvenile Court Celebration

Today and Saturday will be great days to get reacquainted with Victorian Village. The boundaries of Victorian Village CDC are Manassas on the east, Danny Thomas on the west, Poplar on the north and Madison on the south.

Memphis Mayor A C Wharton and Shelby County Mayor Mark Luttrell and others will hold a public ceremony from 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. today on the east portico of Juvenile Court to mark its 100-year anniversary. There will be free tours of the court.

On Saturday, a slate of Victorian Village homecoming events is planned, centering on the front lawn of Juvenile Court and extending down the whole 600 block of Adams.

Right Road 5K Run: registration begins at 7 a.m., the race starts at 9 a.m. Cost is \$15 in advance or \$20 day of event.

Antique Car Show: all day

Bring-your-own picnic: 11 a.m.-1 p.m.in Victorian Village Park.

Di Anne Price and Her Boyfriends: 11 a.m.-noon

Wharton and other dignitaries speak on the front lawn of Juvenile Court, 12:30-1 p.m.

The Wildflowers Bluegrass Band: 1-2 p.m.

The Woodruff-Fontaine House Museum will offer half-price tours from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. The Mallory-Neely House will offer exterior architectural tours from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Juvenile Court tours will be available from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Free.

Bring your old photos of Victorian Village and share stories. The photos will be scanned and archived to further document its history.

For more information, visit victorianvillageinc.org.

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