

Article published Jan 10, 2006

'Hateful' artifact exhibit coming Museum promotes racial tolerance

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DAILY PRESS & ARGUS

What was considered a negative for the city of Howell is now being looked at as a positive.

Last year, the Ku Klux Klan memorabilia auction at the end of January caused controversy throughout a community that has tried hard to rid itself of the perception that it's a breeding ground for KKK activity.

Now the city, along with the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council, is welcoming a traveling exhibit from Ferris State University titled "Hateful Things & ½ Objects from the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University."

The 39-piece traveling exhibition will be open from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday; Saturday, Jan. 21 and Sunday, Jan. 22, at the main floor of the Howell Opera House, 123 W. Grand River Ave.. The museum will also be open from 3-8 p.m. during the weekdays next week.

Before opening to the general public, a media preview and press conference has been scheduled for 2:30 p.m. Saturday at the opera house.

The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia features an extensive collection of objects that trace the history of stereotyping blacks. The exhibition of these items and images is meant to stimulate examination of the historical and contemporary expressions of racism, as well as promoting racial understanding and healing.

Dr. John Thorp, the director of the museum, said it has been to mostly college campuses including Mott Community College, Aquinas College, and Delta Community College.

The exhibit in Howell is recommended for middle school and high school groups, but the public is also welcome to attend. School groups may schedule visits during the week by calling (734) 878-2112.

"In those contexts, it has been well-received," he said. "Faculty members have brought classes and designed assignments around the subject."

While the intentions of the museum are good, there is some fear that people may misinterpret why such a display is coming to downtown Howell.

"One thing we want to convey to the general public is these items are in a museum for the purpose of education," said Vic Lopez, president of the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council. "That is the opposite of what happened with the auction."

Lopez said the exposure to hateful things that have never seen before will be offensive to a lot of people, but it's meant to eliminate those things from happening in the future. It's not a

coincidence that the museum is opening just a day before the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Lopez said this museum should be seen as a tribute to King's work.

Thorp said there have been people who saw a two- or three-minute presentation, and weren't paying close attention to it, who objected to it.

"We made the effort to contact the individual directly," he said. "There is much more to this than they perceived what was happening."

The relationship between the Ferris State museum and the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council began last year because of the auction. Originally community leaders and members of Livingston 2001 wanted to buy a robe with the intention of burning it. Instead, they purchased a \$700 KKK women's cape to donate to the Jim Crow Museum.

"As a group, we wanted to combat what the auction was representing," Lopez said.

Howell's reputation took a huge hit in the late 1980s and early 1990s when former KKK Grand Dragon Robert E. Miles moved to Cohoctah Township and would hold cross-burning rallies. Miles died in 1992. A few years later, the KKK held a rally on the steps of the historical Livingston County Courthouse in downtown Howell. The council was founded in 1988 as a response to the cross-burning incidents that took place in the county.

Lopez believes that having the museum exhibit in Howell could contribute to wiping away those perceptions that outsiders have about Howell.

"We will continue to show through constant media exposure that we are not that type of community," he said. "It will take some time, but we have made tremendous improvements over the years."