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'Hateful' exhibit should be viewed by the community

For years, the community of Howell has suffered under the cloud of a racist reputation because Robert Miles, a grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan, lived in the area until his death in 1992.

At Miles' home in Cohoctah Township, several miles north of Howell, cross burnings and Klan gatherings were common. The controversial Klan leader served time in prison for his part in the 1971 tarring and feathering of Wiley Brownlee, the Willow Run High School principal at the time, as well as for attempting to firebomb 10 Pontiac school buses in 1973. His presence painted the entire community as a haven for hate.

Since then, Howell in particular and Livingston County in general have struggled to overcome the image of being unwelcoming to minorities, especially blacks, in the face of the community being overwhelmingly white.

The community, especially through the work of the Livingston County 2001 Diversity Council and some area churches, has put forth a valiant effort to send the message that Robert Miles did not then and does not now represent what we're all about.

Last year's auction of Klan memorabilia at the Ole Gray Nash Auction house in downtown Howell revived the specter of our community as a haven for hate. As it has in the past, positive forces came together to counter the image the auction was conjuring up.

A candlelight vigil was held while the auction took place; a Klan robe purchased by the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council was donated to the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University.

The museum features an extensive collection of objects from the late 19th century to the present, including popular and commercial culture, images of violence and the civil rights movement. Each piece is put into its proper or political context and is displayed to educate, not turn a profit.

From that collection comes "Hateful Things," a traveling exhibit that furthers the museum's mission to stimulate scholarly examination of historical and contemporary expressions of racism, as well as promote racial understanding and healing.

"Hateful Things" is arriving in Howell this weekend for an eight-day run at the Howell Opera House, located at the corner of Grand River Avenue and Walnut Street in downtown Howell. The 39-piece traveling exhibition is co-sponsored by the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council and Ferris State University. During the week, the exhibit will be open to the public from 3-8 p.m. On the weekend, it will be open noon to 4 p.m. The exhibit begins Sunday and runs through Jan. 22. Admission is free.

School groups can schedule visits during the week by calling (734) 878-2112. The exhibit is recommended for middle school and high school groups.

In the big picture, the exhibit coming to Howell does little to eradicate the racism that persists in southeast Michigan. Rather, its presence here is symbolic, signaling one community's desire to erase an undeserved reputation and leap headlong into the future.

In its own way, the exhibit is one small step for an entire community, and we hope you take the time to participate in helping that small step become a giant leap forward.

We urge every Livingston County resident to take time over the next few days to stop by and view this exhibit.