

Klan robe sale moved to avoid MLK birthday, city to adopt diversity pledge

Expert in black memorabilia says diversity discussions important

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A Howell auctioneer has moved the date he planned to sell a Ku Klux Klan robe back two weeks after being made aware that Saturday, the original date of the auction, was slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

Also this week, the Howell City Council agreed to adopt a citywide diversity resolution on Jan. 24, showing the solidarity of the community.

Ole' Gray Nash Auction Gallery owner Gary Gray said he was asked to change the auction date by a radio talk show host "out of respect for Martin Luther King," he said, adding that he hopes the action will help to heal bad feelings about the Howell community. "My hope is that this shows the world ... we respect all cultures here." he said.

Gray added that the showing of the robe in his window brought him "more (publicity) than he wanted." He said he has been contacted by several people interested in buying the robe immediately, but said it will be sold during the auction and not before. "Anyone is welcome to bid on it, as long as they don't use it for something bad," he added.

The robe caused a stir last week when it was placed prominently in a window display at the auction gallery, but was removed after city officials received complaints and advised the business of them. Howell City Manager Shea Charles said he fielded a few calls complaining about the display and advised the business owner. Vic Lopez, president of the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council, said he felt it was handled appropriately. "If he was refusing to remove it, we might have something to talk to him about," Lopez said. "I think everything that can be done has been done."

The community has remained sensitive to such images, decades after a county resident who was a Klan leader hosted cross burnings on his property.

"One person has given us a black eye and he hasn't even been around for years," said former mayor and Howell City Council Member Paul Rogers. "It kind of gets under your skin a little bit. We definitely wanted to do a resolution to show that we support diversity in this community."

Rogers said Council Member Dawn Cooper, Mayor Pro-tem Steve Manor, who also is on the diversity council, and city staff are expected to draft the resolution.

The sale of the Klan robe has drawn publicity from well outside of Livingston County. It is on consignment for sale from a private owner, said auction house employee Becky Hinz. It was found

in the attic of a Florida home and has 1966 Klan charter membership papers. Hinz said that, although she doesn't condone the associations the robe evokes, it represents part of America's past and is considered a collectible item.

In some circles, the Howell name evokes memories of the community's connection to Klan activist Robert Miles, who held cross-burning rallies on his property in Cohoctah Township in northern Livingston County. Miles died in 1992. That history and image is something the Livingston 2001 Diversity Council has been helping the community to work through and change.

Manor said community sentiment and publicity is healthy and should encourage more discussion. "Obviously, I'm abhorred by the Klan, but it's part of the (country's) history and it's not unique to us," he said, adding that the situation would be different if the auctioneer was promoting ideals represented by the hate group.

The curator of the Jim Crow Racist Memorabilia Museum on the campus of Ferris State University in Big Rapids said he's not surprised by the display, since collecting black memorabilia is in vogue, or the sentiment that it has raised.

"Klan stuff has always been popular," said David Pilgrim, a Ferris sociology professor who helped to found the museum with his collection. The difference today, he said, is that people feel more comfortable showing it. "In the late '60s and '70s, you literally had to beg people to bring out things like that. They would hide it, almost like it was contraband," said Pilgrim, who is black.

His philosophy is that such items belong in a museum or should be destroyed, which he says sometimes makes him unpopular with those who sell and collect such items. "I consider myself a garbage man," he said. "But this garbage can be used to teach us some important lessons."

Reaction to the robe in Howell is understandable, he said, but members of the community must make their own decisions about handling such situations. "I think it's OK to be upset, but people have to understand why they're upset," he said. "How the community responds is more important than what happened. I don't think the talk should be about taking the thing out of the window; the thing they should do is talk openly and honestly about race."

Pilgrim estimates some 50,000 people nationwide - both black and white - collect black memorabilia. He said on a typical day on eBay, there are between 4,000 and 5,000 items being sold in the online auction service's "black Americana" category.

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