Several receive Philadelphia's HistoryMakers distinction

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CENTER CITY >> It's not every day that one gets their life story preserved in the National Library of Congress.

Yet this is just what happened to a half-dozen locals, including some with Northwest Philadelphia connections. Among those honored was author, scholar and bibliophile Charles L. Blockson, a Norristown native who resides in Cheltenham.

Second District Congressman Chaka Fattah, whose district includes parts of Mount Airy and Chestnut Hill, and Fatin Dantzler, a member of the recording duo Kindred the Family Soul, which performed in the area in the past, were among those who received the Philadelphia’s HistoryMakers distinction.

Also among this year’s honorees were former Mayor W. Wilson Goode, current Mayor Michael Nutter and Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown. HistoryMakers and Comcast Foundation President Charisse Lillie, of Mount Airy, hosted the reception at the Comcast Center in Center City on Tuesday, May 26.

"It is important to preserve our history," said Blockson, whose most recent book is "The President’s House Revisited Behind the Scenes: The Samuel Fraunces Story." In this, he chronicles the many stories that rely on information on the historical document that records the names and descriptions of 3,000 formerly enslaved Africans who worked for the British army during the American Revolution.

Blockson shared how he found this information.

"Historical stories and collecting books by and about our history is something that I have committed my life to do. Samuel Fraunces founded a tavern in Philadelphia before the famous one in New York City ... It's all in that Book of Negroes. That's where I learned the amazing facts about Samuel Fraunces the Pennsylvania black man who started the tavern that is now located on Wall Street where few of us can eat lunch," Blockson said.

Perhaps no one was more surprised than Dantzler. She previously shared much of her story with these newspapers when she was among the Grammy SoundChecks Philadelphia artists who shared their experience with youths from around the city, including some from Germantown, Mount Airy and West Oak Lane. This was a program funded by the Grammy Foundation in Los Angeles.

At that time, she said that preserving African-American musical history was important.

"Music is an art and is as much a part of our history as anything else," Dantzler said. "Family has always been important to us. That’s why we started out as a family group. This is all part of our synergy that keeps us together like a strong tree."

The HistoryMakers is a national educational institution committed to preserving, developing and providing easy access to
an internationally recognized, archival collection of thousands of African-American video oral histories. It is the single largest archival collection of its kind in the world. In 2014, the Library of Congress acquired HistoryMakers.

The collection includes 9,000 hours of content that includes 14,000 analog tapes, 3,000 DVDs, 6,000 born-digital files, 70,000 paper documents and digital files and more than 30,000 digital photographs. It is also composed of 2,600 videotaped interviews with African Americans in 39 states, averaging three to six hours in length.

“The Philadelphia area leaders are a big part of our archives,” said Julieanna Richardson, founder and executive director of The HistoryMakers. “With the Library of Congress serving as our permanent repository, we are assured of its preservation and safekeeping for generations to come.”

Yet Richardson has her own hopes to expand this project to include a more local archives so that those who live in neighborhoods like Mount Airy, West Oak Lane and Germantown need not take a trek to the center of the nation’s capital.

“We would like Philadelphia to have its own bureau,” Richardson said. “Having a bureau would allow [us] to be represented in the HistoryMakers national archives, which is housed by the Library of Congress. Philly has a rich history and should have a larger presence with its oral archives.

“In the top cities where notable individuals are included, Chicago has more than 500 people, New York has 300 and Washington, D.C., has 400. Philadelphia has only 40. Having a bureau will ensure more individuals would be included,” Richardson said.