Collection honors history makers in Black community

Samaria Bailey Tribune Correspondent | Posted: Saturday, May 30, 2015 12:00 am

The visual and oral histories of 40 pioneering Philadelphia Black men and women are a permanent, tangible imprint in American culture, as they are available in the Library of Congress, part of the HistoryMakers collection, the world’s most comprehensive oral history archives of African-American pioneers.

Wilson Goode Sr., Blanche Burton-Lyles, Acel Moore, William H. Gray III, Ione Vargas, Blondell Reynolds Brown, Kenny Gamble, Kindred the Family Soul and Charles Blockson, are among the prominent Philadelphians whose stories are a part of the collection, which boasts a total of 2,600 videotaped interviews of African-Americans in more than 30 states. They were recognized during a ceremony at Comcast, on Thursday, for their inclusion.

“The HistoryMakers represents the single largest archival project of its kind, and Philadelphia area leaders are a big part of our archives,” said Julieanna Richardson, Founder and Executive Director of HistoryMakers. “With the Library of Congress serving as our permanent repository, we are assured of its preservation and safekeeping for generations to come.”

The criteria used to select the subjects, she said, was “leadership and richness of history.”

Once they were chosen, the HistoryMakers team conducted research on their life, including family history, education background and career accomplishments. Interviews were then held with the subjects, lasting up to six hours.

“Being a part of an archive of African-American history, it’s an amazing thing to be included,” said Aja Graydon, one half of the soul music group, Kindred the Family Soul. “And telling our story [wasn’t] just an opportunity to give our resume’. It just talks about who [we] are, what made [us] who [we] are, and where [we] come from. One of the questions they asked me was ‘what were the smells and sounds in my house during my childhood.’ I thought that was poignant.”
Graydon said she and her husband, Fatin Dantzler, met Richardson at a tribute performance for Nickolas Ashford after his death. They shared their story with Richardson and she invited them to be a part of HistoryMakers.

“Just to be apart of it and tell our story, I think it’s a beautiful thing,” Dantzler said. “Being in a moving picture of our history, that’s a huge step in the right direction and having our story and historical facts safe and guarded for generations to come that’s magnificent.”

Blanche Burton-Lyles, founder of the Marian Anderson Historical Society, and the first African-American pianist to perform at Carnegie Mellon with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, said she felt “very blessed” to be included.

George Beech, an artist, businessman, and one of the founders of the African American Historical Calendar, shared similar feelings.

“I [am] absolutely ecstatic because I am joining this group of African-American men and women to have done wonderful things over the course of their lives,” he said.

One of the most rewarding results Beech has experienced from producing the calendar, is the number of lives he’s touched, stating that he sells, on average, a million per year.

“I love it because I can go to various cities and people say ‘Aren’t you the calendar guy?’ and I say ‘yes,’ I love it,” he said.

The first African-American mayor of the city, Goode, said he was grateful to be included in the HistoryMakers archive but is even more grateful that it exists.

“I think it’s very important that African-Americans in this country have something that reminds future generations of the contributions made in this generation,” he said. “Too often people do not record their history. So often contributions made by African-Americans are left up to others to interpret rather than African-Americans interpret the contributions made by African-Americans. It’s important for us to keep on recording what we do so others will remember in future generations.”

HistoryMakers is seeking out more African-American Philadelphians to include in its archive and is willing to partner with churches and community organizations.

Upon the end of the ceremony, Charisse Lillie, Vice President of Community Investment of Comcast Corporation and President of the Comcast Foundation, who was also a HistoryMakers honoree, said she hoped that more African-Americans would connect with the project.

“Philadelphia is a treasure trove of African-American history and by [Richardson’s] account, she feels Philadelphia is underrepresented. We are hoping by bringing these folk into Comcast and introducing those not yet HistoryMakers will create an opportunity to raise money, interview these folks and get them on tape.”
All of the Philadelphia HistoryMaker honorees that have their oral histories available in the Library of Congress are: Molefi Kete Asante, African American studies professor; George Beech, graphic artist and advertising executive, Beech Advertising; Frederic Bertley, Immunologist and museum education administrator; Robert W. Bogle, Publisher and CEO of The Philadelphia Tribune; Earle Bradford, Jr. Energy executive – CEO of Community for Mental Health & Mental retardation; Delores Brisbon, healthcare management consultant and hospital chief executive; Blanche Burton-Lyles, cultural heritage chief executive and founder of Marian Anderson Historical Society; Donald Camp, photographer; Emma Chappell, banker and trailblazer commerce director for Rainbow PUSH Wall Street Project; Augusta Clark, former city council member; A. Bruce Crawley, public relations, president of Millennium 3 Management; Tyrone T. Dancy, author, U.S. Combat veteran; Fatin Dantzler, R&B singer and songwriter; Lillian Dickerson, Civic activist; Herbert Paul Douglas, Jr., marketing consultant and track and field athlete; Art Fennell, broadcast journalist; Jack T. Franklin, photographer; Kenny Gamble, co-founder of Philadelphia International Records; Joe Geeter, III, the 16th National President of the Montford Point Marine Association; Larry Gladney, physicist; Aja Graydon, musician; Williams H. Gray III, former U.S. Congressman; Princell Hair, Emmy Award winning journalist; Rev. Dr. John Harris, foundation executive and Minister; Wendell Holland, lawyer; Rev. Dr. Millicent Hunter, pastor, educator and author; Theodore A. McKee, appellate court judge; Jerome Mondesire, publisher of The Philadelphia Sun; Acel Moore, former Inquirer editor; Derrick Pitts, atmospheric scientist; James Poyser, Songwriter, producer and musician; Norma Pratt, Transportation chief executive; Sonia Sanchez, poet; Carl Singley, lawyer; Ione Teresa Vargus, professor; Romance Watson, gospel singer; Dyana Williams, radio personality and music producer.