

Feelings of growth, but not enough for African Americans celebrating museum opening



Attendees gather at the National Mall to witness the inauguration of the first African American Museum

This past Saturday morning started out like any other day for many, however it was quite different around the Capital Region. Early in the morning, crowds started to gather on the National Mall, metro stations were packed full of people, and the streets of DC were abuzz as a new historic building was set to open to the public.

More than a century in the making and countless hours of planning, the African-American experience finds an outlet to tell its story. With the National Monument as a backdrop, the grand opening ceremony of the National Museum of African American History & Culture was witnessed by thousands of people from all over the country.

While visitors said they celebrated the first museum devoted to African American history, the current relationship between black communities and police is of ongoing concern according to some.

One such person was Hassan Shabazz, a resident of Washington D.C. Shabazz attended the dedication on Saturday morning. If you attended the opening, Shabazz wasn't hard to find as he was standing on the corner with a big sign that said 'F the police.' When talking with him, he

said that his goal was to make his voice heard. “It’s an important day and it’s a long time coming,” he said.

Shabazz said that he was happy and proud to have served as a construction worker during the museum’s building phase and see it to its fruition. “It’s beautiful, the black man’s history is vast, epic, ancient and even older than America,” he said.

Recent shootings of black men in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Charlotte, North Carolina has shook African Americans. Shabazz feels that blacks are manipulated and that they have major struggles to deal with for years to come.

“There’s police brutality, we see people being killed by these racist white cops across the country, we can’t be timid because sometimes you even get killed just for not fighting,” he said. “I don’t smile, I don’t show my teeth, and usually keep my distance, but we got to be in their faces sometimes,” he added.

In an effort to unite black folks and make a difference, Shabazz and a few friends started the New Black Panther Party, an organization that stands for the freedom of African Americans. And, although he believes the country has come far, he said it still has a long way to go. “Black people are still being gunned down,” he said.

Seeing the dedication was a bonding opportunity for many. Lynn Dorcas and her best friend, Ruth Kinsey, came from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for what they called ‘a special day.’

“The truth will finally be told about us, there’s been so many lies. It took so long for it to happen and it’s just so historical,” Dorcas said with tears in her eyes.

“And the fact that our black president opened it makes my heart even fuller. It’s a breath of fresh air to come to this,” Dorcas added.

Dorcas sees the current unrest with police in this county as a reflexion of racism that has been hidden for so long and that it is now coming out. “It’s right out there now and it shows hatred for the way they view us, they don’t consider us as people - they think they can just shoot us down when they please,” she said.

Similarly, Eric Janifer, a residential contractor from Washington, D.C. shares Dorcas’ same concerns. “It’s uncalled for and unnecessary. There’s still a lot to be done in terms of racism,” he said.

Janifer believes that the police always have something they don't want to release that could be detrimental. "Everytime we take two steps forward, something happens and somehow we go back," he said.

New Yorker Sharif Ali Shafi, member of the Freedom Fighters of WDC, was standing out with a slave inspired wardrobe, with blood and shackles as accessories. He wanted to show the struggle and pain African Americans had to go through and still are experiencing.

"This museum will tell a part of our story, but don't fall asleep yet because there is a whole bunch of problems we need to address and deal with," Shafi said.

The shootings that took place recently, Shafi said, is heartbreaking. "It's unfortunate, unarmed men were killed. The majority of these policemen are not going to jail after killing innocent black man and that's a problem," he said.

Retired veteran Eugene Townes was another attendee moved by the inauguration of the museum. "It gives a better understanding of what these caucasians did wrong to African Americans," he said. "They held us back, they said we were inferior, and that we are ignorant," he added.

Some agreed that the country has come far over the years, but that it also must make significant changes that are urgent and systematic. Finding a solution to what's going on in the country remains in question, but a good first step may be to address corrupt police officers and those that cover up the evidence. "Those policemen need to be trained on how to handle certain situations better. They should find out more facts before they pull that trigger," Townes said.