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Voices from the Field: Exploring Partnerships with the African American Library at Gregory School in Houston, Texas

Bernardo E. Pohl jr
pohlb@uhd.edu

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The African-American Library at the Gregory School opened its door in November of 2009. It is located in Houston's historic Freedman's Town, today's Houston's Midtown. The library is housed inside the Edgar M. Gregory School, which served as the first school for African American students in the Houston area. The first library of its kind in the Houston area and one of the few African American libraries in the nation, the African-American Library at the Gregory School serves as a valuable resource to preserve and promote the rich history and culture of American Americans in Houston and the surrounding regions.

The Gregory School was built in 1926. It is a monument and a symbol of the legacy and sacrifices made by the African-American community during the era of segregation, oppression, and educational disadvantage. The building is named in honor of Edgar M. Gregory, a Union officer and Assistant Commissioner with the Freedmen's Bureau of Texas, located in Freedman's Town Historical District, Houston's Fourth Ward, which is the city's oldest established African-American community. Today, the neighborhood is the epicenter of Houston's current urban revival. However, this revival is only translating into the construction of luxury housing and lofts, boutique restaurants and coffee shops, and upscale shopping, not into the historical preservation of the neighborhood and the community.

Dr. Bernardo Pohl conducted an interview with Ms. Valerie Wade, the library's historian and oral archivist, to discuss the library's history, partnerships, and vital role in the community. The interview has been edited for clarity.

JFS: How are you?

VW: I am doing very well. Thank you. How are you?

JFS: I am doing very well too. Thank you for having us today. Tell us a little bit about the African American Library, and its history.

VW: Yes! Well, the African American Library opened in November of 2009. So, we have been here for a while, but we're a pretty new library. We are established inside the Gregory School, which is a historic elementary school in Houston, Texas. It was originally opened as the Gregory Institute in 1870, so it was part of the reconstruction era of Freedmen's Bureau Schools. It was a Freedmen's school at that time. And it has operated continuously since then, from 1870 until 1903. It was operated in a single building, I want to say. In 1903, there was a fire. I think. And then, another building was established. And that building was used until 1926, when this building was established, which is the building

that it is used until this day. It operated as a school until 1984, when the school was shut down. That was when Gregory Lincoln was established. That is why we have similar names. So, there was a combination of buildings and things went on in the 80s. So, this was an empty building until?

JFS: 2000s?

VW: Yes, when they started construction and things like that.

JFS: Has it been the same building since 1926?

VW: Yes, it has been the same building since 1926, until it shut down. Of course, when it shut down in 84, and it did not open for twenty years, it was in disrepair, so the roof was gone and things like that. But they reopen it years later.

JFS: How did it become a library? How did they decide to do that?

VW: There was, and this is history that I am still learning about. So, a few mayors ago.

JFS: Ok.

VW: Yes, a few mayors ago...I understand...I understand that people started to have a conversation about having an African American Library in Houston. So, even though it opened in 2009, people were talking about it and trying to figure out a location, may be even close to a decade before that. And I think even before, even in the 90s, I think there was a group of people talking about an African American archive or something to that effect here in Houston. But...this is an area that I'm not an expert. However, there were talks early in the 2000s, and they got the funding, and we opened in 2009.

JFS: I know that one of the big thing about the library is the partnerships that all of you have with local school districts and universities.

VW: Yeah!

JFS: Can you elaborate more about that?

VW: Yes! Well...mmm...let's see. I can't speak about everything that happened before I came here. I've been here for almost two years. And I know that before I came, the Gregory School had the Visiting Scholars from Rice. That was a partnership with Rice University. And Center for Engaged Research...and Civic Learning Program. So, there was that

partnership. It was for students, graduates, and young professors, so they could come and use our archives. So, there was that partnership. Now, when I came, a couple of years ago, I...felt...I felt like there were a lot strengths, here, that were untapped. We had this great archive here. And Houston had many universities. So, I thought: "We need to figure out how to get more professors and students in this space." Because we are a pretty new library, and people still don't know that we're here. I think that tapping into those resources is a great way to promote the African American Library.

JFS: Exactly!

VW: Yes, exactly! And...

JFS: And people thought an African American Library was much needed here.

VW: Yes, yes exactly. So, I started to just put the word out there when I just got here, looking for volunteers, and....looking for anybody that was just interested. Just knocking doors and see who was interested. So, this how I became in contact with Dr. Leigh Van Horn at UHD [University of Houston-Downtown]...and she got some students involved. And that is how...you know...it just simply went from there. It was just a matter of saying, hey let's be out more in the community, so that more people know about us, more universities know more about us. So that we can help more university students with their major, thesis, and university projects. That is why we here for.

JFS: Wow! Tell us more about the partnership and projects that all of you have with UHD.

VW: Yes, let's see. I think that by now there has been a couple, right?

JFS: Yeah...right.

VW: Right. There has been more than one. So, the original partnership was when Dr. Van Horn and I got together and tried to get some students to do oral history transcriptions.

JFS: Oh, wow!

VW: Yes! So there was some students that she knew who were interested in education...and they were perfect for transcription because they were interested in the subject matter and history. That was one of the early

projects, and that was very helpful for me because oral history transcriptions take a long time...

JFS: I know...

VW: ...and I was just getting started here, so I said to myself, "I will never get this done by myself." So I needed to figure out a way to do this and get some help, but help some people in the process too. This is how I always approached things. So the first partnership was the Oral History Transcription Partnership. And there...that was when you started to bring your class...

JFS: Yeah! I remember when I started to bring my class.

VW: So, there was a transition from the oral transcription to trying to figure out how to help student teachers how to use this space.

JFS: I remember when Dr. Van Horn approached me, and said, "Hey Bernardo, I got this project going. Do you want to be part of that?" And I said, "Yes! I like to be involved." And I have to say, students loved it. They really enjoyed what they did here.

VW: Thank you!

JFS: The student that came here always tell me they had a good time.

VW: Oh! I am glad! I hope they had a good time. Because no matter what they do, I hope they get something out of it. I hope it benefits them somehow, somehow.

JFS: Is there is any other project going on besides the transcription and my classes?

VW: Well, yes! There is one partnership that we have with Texas Southern University right now with Dr. Jessie Esparza's history students. They are examining oral histories that we have, and some manuscripts, and some photos, and they are going to write a report. And at the end of the semester they have to do a presentation, practice some public speaking, and use the materials to create an online exhibit for the class. And that is a really great partnership because the people who donate the material enjoy learning how the students are using it. That's one project.

JFS: Nice!

VW: We are also working with Dr. Monica Perales from UH-Main [University of Houston-Main Campus] and her Public History Program.

She has a couple of students who will be coming over and do a report on us as a public institution. That project is really cool. And we are also partnering with HISD [Houston Independent School District] and bring fourth and fifth graders to tour the galleries.

JFS: That must be nice!

VW: Yeah! It has been interesting. I am most used to work with adults and college students. Therefore, transmitting the information to nine and ten-years old have been a bit of a challenge...but in a good way. But yeah...that is why we are here, to have all this partnerships. There is no reason why we should not be communicating with HISD, UH, and other schools. There are too many schools around here.

JFS: And my last question: what is the most important thing the library is getting out of this partnership?

VW: The most important thing that I think we are getting out of these partnerships is the engagement with people of all ages. And that is important for us. Because not only we are collecting and caring important historical documents and artifacts from the community, but we have to think about how to make these things useful and approachable to the public. And doing this partnerships help us get a better sense of how everything works. So we see that children are more interested in this. And the high school kids pay more attention to that. And college students are more engaging when they do this. So, this is very helpful to us in getting a better idea on how people of different ages become engaged with history. And this is important for us. It helps figure out how to better use this space.

JFS: And this is really important because of the historical location of the library in this neighborhood.

VW: Yes! And this is very important. There are so many conversations to be had about gentrification and urban revival. The simple truth is that we were not here as a building the, history of this community...

JFS: It would be lost.

VW: Yeah, the new people moving here do not know about the history of this neighborhood. This a very historic neighborhood.

JFS: Valerie Wade, thank you for your time and the partnerships!

VW: Thank you for coming!

