

Historic Topeka women's club to reopen with museum honoring city's black leaders

By Phil Anderson

Posted Feb 1, 2019 at 5:38 PM Updated Feb 2, 2019 at 1:04 AM

For years, a church in Topeka's Tennessee Town neighborhood has invested in its neighborhood by cleaning up rundown and abandoned property and helping individuals become homeowners instead of renters.

Now, Faith Temple Church, 1162 S.W. Lincoln, is spearheading a major project that will honor key leaders from the city's black community with a museum in their honor.

The museum will be located in the newly renovated Colored Women's Club house at 1149 S.W. Lincoln.

A grand opening reception will be held from 4 to 6 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 21, at the house. Immediately after the reception, at 6 p.m., students from the International Academy Charter School will present a re-enactment of the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court hearing at Faith Temple Church.

Sandra Lassiter, co-pastor of Faith Temple Church and principal of the International Academy, said the house at 1149 S.W. Lincoln that formerly housed the Colored Women's Club had fallen into disrepair through the years.

As she gave a recent tour of the house, Lassiter pointed out several dozen bullet holes that had damaged the property before restoration work was done.

She said no vandalism or damage had been reported since repair work began this past summer.

She said about \$35,000 in renovations have been made at the house. About \$20,000 of the cost has been picked up by Faith Temple Church through the Community First nonprofit, with additional funds contributed by other local businesses, churches and groups.

"This is a community effort," Lassiter said. "This is more than just Community First and Faith Temple."

She noted several other congregations in the immediate area have been supportive, including Asbury-Mount Olive United Methodist Church, Lane Chapel Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church and First Church of the Nazarene.

Lassiter, 70, a lifelong Topekan, said the goal of the museum was to keep alive the city's rich history as it pertains to its black leaders.

As she entered through the new front door at the two-story, wooden-frame house, Lassiter pointed to the south wall in the front room that will feature photographs of early leaders of the Colored Women's Club, which she said was a precursor to many of today's civic and charitable organizations in the capital city. That section will be called the Founder's Wall, she said.

One of the first photos that will be hung on the wall is that of Johnine Powell, an early leader of the Colored Women's Club.

Lassiter said the Colored Women's Club moved to the location in Tennessee Town when many venues in Topeka were closed to groups and organizations that catered to black people. As a result, the Colored Women's Club had its own building. The organization's name later became the Colored Women's and Girls' Club.

Lassiter said the west wall in the front room will be dedicated to individuals who were the first black residents of Topeka to achieve a certain accomplishment, ranging from business owners to clergy and educators. Among those slated to be honored are the late Bishop Aletha Cushinberry, pastor of the Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ; former Topeka Fire Chief Joe Douglas; and former Topeka Water Commissioner Jack Alexander.

Once it is up and running, Lassiter said, the museum will be the site of regularly scheduled activities, including an after-school program for middle-school students. It also will be open by appointment for tours, with International Academy eighth-graders Aaliyah Smith, J.R. Patty and Choize Hysten serving as guides. International Academy is a charter school that meets at Faith Temple Church.

Lassiter said she sees the reopening of the Colored Women's Club as a much-needed reminder of the history of Tennessee Town. The area was so named because it was the landing spot for freed slaves who came to Topeka from Tennessee in 1879, after the Civil War. The area is bounded roughly by S.W. 10th Avenue on the north, S.W. Washburn Avenue on the west, S.W. Huntoon on the south and S.W. Clay on the east.

Beyond preserving local history, Lassiter said, Faith Temple Church envisions the reopening of the Colored Women's Club as a part of its ministry in Tennessee Town.

"It's an investment in this community," she said. "It's an investment for our children, for our families. We value our neighborhood. We value the people in our neighborhood."

"We are about the kingdom. This is about diversity. That's why we value everybody."

Lassiter said she is taking nominations for people to be honored at the museum. Plaques commemorating honorees can be purchased for \$100, with proceeds benefiting the museum's upkeep and helping provide scholarships for students at the International Academy.

Those wishing to have a family member or acquaintance commemorated at the museum may call Lassiter at (785) 221-5694 or Faith Temple Church at (785) 235-1834.