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Reginald F. Lewis Museum needs to open itself up to the community to survive

The Reginald F. Lewis Museum of African American History & Culture is trying to reverse years of poor attendance and fundraising. Nabbing a blockbuster traveling exhibit is just a start.

► Story by SARAH MEEHAN **PAGES 12-13**



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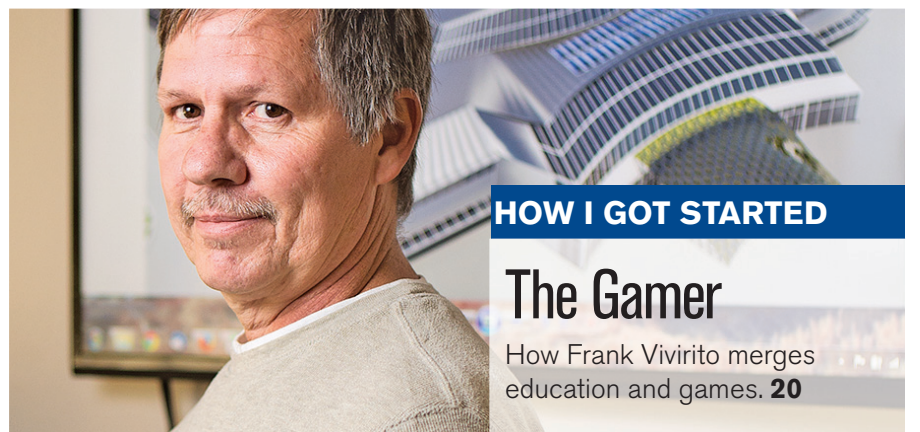
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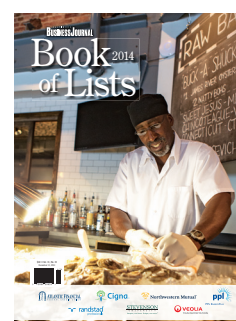
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A. Skipp Sanders wants potential visitors to understand that African-American history is American history. Below, part of the museum's permanent collection.

STORIES BY SARAH MEEHAN | STAFF
PHOTOS BY JACLYN BOROWSKI | STAFF

Lewis Museum has struggled with poor attendance, low funding — now it's taking action

A. Skipp Sanders waits in line to grab lunch at a downtown cafe a few blocks from his office. It's a ritual he performs weekly: He'll turn to someone else waiting in line with him and ask, "Have you been to the Reginald F. Lewis?"

"Not a week has gone by that someone hasn't said, 'Where is it?'" Sanders said.

Most folks in Baltimore have probably seen the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture, where Sanders is executive director. A black, angular box of a building at the base of President Street, it's hard to miss.

But for the past eight years, the institution has been overlooked.

The Lewis Museum has struggled since it opened in 2005 to attract visitors and funding, problems outlined in a state audit of the Maryland African American Museum Corp., the group that runs the museum. An institution that was projected to attract 150,000 visitors annually, the museum has averaged 38,000 attendees each year. That shortfall in visitation has contributed to its funding problems. The museum has consistently failed to generate \$2 million in revenue to match the state government's annual allocation, meaning the state has had to make up the difference — more than \$400,000 each of the past two years.

"The challenge that the Reginald F. Lewis faces is not unique to African-American museums, and it's within the context of a shifting cultural landscape

nationally where all the museums and the leaders of all museums have to think in new ways," said Patricia Wilson Aden, president and CEO of the African American Museum in Philadelphia. "We can no longer depend upon public funding, corporate funding is shifting, philanthropy is shifting, so we all have to be on our toes."

A successful Reginald F. Lewis starts inside the museum's walls with high-caliber exhibits, programs and events that attract a diverse audience. Its potential for growth lies in outreach beyond the physical building. So after spending more than a year plotting a financial turnaround, the Lewis Museum is now working to secure its future in Baltimore by opening its arms to new members, getting its name out in surrounding communities, chasing sponsorships and thinking outside the boxy building it inhabits.

A home for all

African-American history is American history, and that's a message Sanders wants to convey to potential museum patrons.

"People who come here and realize how welcoming the museum is, that it's not a FUBU museum — it's not 'for us by us,'" Sanders said. "I have heard that people have often wondered, would I be welcomed there? Well, if you come through the doors, you'll get that answer immediately: Yes you are, because it's your home."

Getting that message out has been tough for the Lewis Museum, which did not have a marketing director for two years before Helen Yuen joined the staff in September. Although the institution is a prominent landmark at 830 E. Pratt St., there's hardly any signage outside to tell visitors what it is.

The museum's Kinsey Collection, a traveling exhibit currently on display through March 2, has demonstrated the power marketing can have when paired with a strong exhibit. Wells Fargo's \$200,000 sponsorship of the exhibit includes radio spots, print ads and banners that direct visitors to the museum. The exhibit saw 2,000 visitors in its opening weekend.

"If we could have 38,000 people com-

ing through this museum with very little marketing and advertising, just think of how well we could do with the work of all that," said Andrew Bertamini, regional president of Wells Fargo and a new museum board member.

Wells Fargo's sponsorship is the largest corporate sponsorship the Lewis Museum has garnered to date, and Sanders said he hopes to cultivate other sizable corporate donors to support future exhibits.

Unlike many other arts and culture museums, African-American museums generally do not have strong backing from generational wealth. The Walters Art Museum had seven individuals — not including corporate partners — who each donated more than \$50,000 to the museum in fiscal 2012. And a third of the Baltimore Museum of Art's \$12 million in fiscal 2012 revenue came from contributions. Neither of those institutions rely on admission charges to boost their revenue — they're both free to enter.

Going forward, appealing to diverse donors will be just as important to the Lewis Museum as reaching a diverse audience.

Rebranding and redefining

Apart from fundraising, the Lewis Museum's turnaround also hinges on redefining its role in the community and rebranding its image with what sets it apart from other institutions.

Continued on next page

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One of the greatest challenges Aden said African-American museums face now is competition from other arts and culture institutions that are putting on exhibits celebrating African-American history and culture.

"We don't have special claim on any particular audience or any particular donor group," Aden said. "We are not the only destination for someone seeking an African-American experience. That's a change and that means the field is more competitive."

Where the Lewis Museum can shine is in its ability to tell rich stories of unsung Maryland African-Americans, beyond the stories of well-known figures.

"It's moving away from just talking about big people, big events, big dates," Sanders said. "What was going on around all that? How do you get the flavor of the whole thing? What were the times like? What were ordinary people doing?"

Establishing the museum's brand

also means having something it is known for — a "wow." The Lewis Museum doesn't have one yet, but Sanders hopes to one day acquire a stand-out piece — such as an artifact that belonged to a prominent Maryland African-American figure like Thurgood Marshall or Harriet Tubman.

"We're still looking for our 'wow,'" Sanders said. "I would like to see us fis-

cally strong enough to be able to purchase something that almost becomes symbolic of the Reginald F. Lewis Museum. So at the Louvre, it's the Mona Lisa, right?"

But there's more to a museum than the stuff inside it.

"It's also thinking nontraditionally and bringing the museum outside the brick and mortar," Yuen said. "That's hugely important for us to build visibility, audience and revenue."

That can mean offering events that relate to the population the Lewis Museum serves, such as the Black Women and Breast Cancer health forum the museum hosted in October, during

Breast Cancer Awareness Month. Accessibility is another issue the museum must address — making it itself financially accessible by offering days when admission is discounted from the regular \$8, and geographically accessible by hosting events outside the institution.

The Lewis Museum is also looking to host more private and corporate events. With a theater that can

hold 800 people — or 200 seated — as well as conference rooms and classroom space, the museum wants to become a destination for everything from weddings to sickle cell blood drives, which will both generate income and get people through the door.

"We want to be embedded in this community," Sanders said. "We want to be seen as a full community resource."

► BY THE NUMBERS

\$200,000+

Value of Wells Fargo's Kinsey Collection sponsorship

\$3.1M

Maryland African American Museum Corp.'s operating expenditures in fiscal 2012

\$1.46M

Worth of museum's art and artifacts collections



A notable collection of art that you've probably never heard of

If you don't know what the Kinsey Collection at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History & Culture is, you're not alone.

Even the museum's executive director, A. Skipp Sanders, didn't know what was in the collection before Wells Fargo Regional President Andrew Bertamini called to ask if he was interested in bringing it to the museum.

"He said, 'Do you know what it is?' And I said, 'Uh, not really,'" Sanders recalled.

Bertamini then proceeded to tell Sanders what was in the collection.

"And when he went down the list I said, 'Andy, if this phone wire were fat enough, I'd be on that side of the room hugging you.'"

The Kinsey Collection is a private collection of African-American art and artifacts spanning 400 years. About a third of the entire collection, curated by husband and wife Bernard and Shirley Kinsey, is currently on display at the Lewis Museum through March 2, 2014.

Here are a few highlights from the exhibit:

- An early copy of the Emancipation Proclamation.
- A signed copy of the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*.
- A poster of the first black congressional representatives.
- A bust of abolitionist and social reformer Frederick Douglass.
- Shackles from the mid-1800s that were used for female slaves.

Sobering audit turned up problem issues that Lewis is now addressing

When the state audited the Maryland African American Museum Corp., the group that runs the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, earlier this year, the findings weren't pretty. Here's a look at some of the problems that came out in the audit and the museum's plans to fix them.

Endowment fund

• **Problem:** Maryland African American Museum Corp. could not provide documentation during a state audit that its board's finance and audit committee monitored its endowment fund, and the committee did not direct endowment investments as specified in its investment policy.

• **Solution:** MAAMC will form an investment committee to revisit the endowment investment policy, recommend investment changes to the board of directors, monitor and direct investments in accordance with the revisited policy and report back to the board quarterly.

Annual reports

• **Problem:** Annual reports for fiscal 2011 and fiscal 2012 were not submitted as required to Gov. Martin O'Malley and the Maryland General Assembly.

• **Solution:** The MAAMC prepared a draft of the annual report for fiscal 2011 to submit by Dec. 31, and the report for fiscal 2012 was submitted on April 19. The museum also hired a development director, a position vacant for two years, who will prepare future annual reports.

Inventory

• **Problem:** Adequate controls were not established over collections of art and artifacts.

• **Solution:** The museum will maintain a control record of its collections; separate the duties of maintaining records, having physical access to collections and conducting inventories; and conduct an inventory at least every three years and investigate differences between the results and records.

Fundraising

• **Problem:** Museum has been unable to meet its fundraising requirement of matching state funding dollar for dollar.

• **Solution:** The museum hopes to increase its revenue from concessions — rentals, the museum shop and cafe — and fill vacancies on its board with members capable of meeting annual giving expectations. The museum also filled vacant marketing and development positions to improve outreach and cultivate a mix of revenue.

Attendance

• **Problem:** Attendance consistently fell short of 150,000 annually, a level of visitation the museum was projected to attract before it opened. On average, only about 38,000 visitors come to the museum annually.

• **Solution:** The museum will improve marketing and outreach, and offer high quality exhibits, programs and events year-round to enrich visitors' experiences.

The Kinsey Collection is one example of an exhibit and related programming drawing the kind of attendance the museum wants to see — 2,000 visitors in its opening weekend alone.

Board of directors

• **Problem:** Lack of fundraising capacity.

• **Solution:** The minimum give/get contribution for board members will increase from \$2,500 to \$5,000 in fiscal 2015. The museum also must fill vacant board positions and submit names of new board members for the governor's office approval by early January.

Vacant leadership positions

• **Problem:** Two-year vacancies for marketing and development directors.

• **Solution:** The museum hired marketing director Helen Yuen and D'ana Downing, associate director of development.

► BUSINESS LENS

Check out BBJ Photographer Jaclyn Borowski's singular view of what's on display at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum.

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