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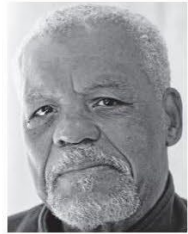
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COMMUNITY COLUMNIST

North Omaha lessons from a national tour of Black history

It has become my annual routine to report on my annual Black Votes Matter (BVM) Face to Face with Black History Tour. As you may know, the BVM Tour



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was created to provide a mechanism to educate high school youth on the accurate Black history, including the cause, effect and impact of the civil rights movement. The tour is conducted annually in late June and we

recently completed our sixth year.

I rate this year's tour as our best ever. We had a wonderful group of fully engaged high school students, an extraordinarily wonderful mix of race, ethnicity, backgrounds and talents that ignited the learning for all participants. Finally, this year we allocated a small number of seats to paying adults. Please note, the high school children attend the tour at no cost. We depend on donations to fund the trip each year. Adults are charged a reasonable fee to cover their costs for transportation, lodging, meals, and venue fees.

This year, the tour's focal point was the historic significance of Black economic excellence and struggles. We visited, for the first time, the very complex and horrible story of the 1921 massacre in Tulsa, Oklahoma's "Black Wall Street." We visited the home of Alabama's first Black millionaire, A. G. Gaston, who owned and operated funeral homes, motels, insurance companies and more — and was a key financier to the civil rights movement. We also visited Atlanta's historic Black business corridors, with all their glory and struggles, as well as the city's new Black economic boom and a self-described "new" Black Wall Street.

The takeaways were the similarities that could be found in all three areas, where Black prosperity was met by envy, racism, destruction, and in Tulsa's case, a massacre.



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Smoke engulfs buildings and the sky during the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921.

A special note about Tulsa. When airplanes dropped fire-bombs onto the wealthy Greenwood District, a Black business district in Tulsa, every structure was destroyed. But survivors of the firebombings huddled in a small basement room at the Vernon A.M.E. Church. Some 300-plus people were huddled in a room that could barely hold half of them. Outside, fires created so much heat that the church's structural poles became so hot they could not be touched.

At the church, which was rebuilt, and most of us on our tour symbolically touched the pole to honor the victims.

As we learn the litany of destroyed Black economics across our nation, we must understand that our own North Omaha went through the same cycle. We had celebrated very successful commerce on our key corridor at 24th and Lake Streets, before the area suffered destruction, albeit because our residents reacted to the unceremonious murder of 14-year-old Vivian Strong by a policeman in 1969. But our story in North Omaha should focus on the lack of any major investment, or commitment to investment for 50-plus years.

Now, Omaha sits on the edge

of our economic recovery, with the potential of hundreds of millions of dollars in federal money as the catalyst. Will the money be spent wisely? Will it be another lost opportunity for North Omaha? Will it be a few inside deals with the bulk going to a few in our community who already have resources? We should demand recovery, not rewards. In the Greenwood area in Tulsa, that district suffered for years from false commitments and promises, years of stalling and studies and calls for development. Tulsa, too, sits on the edge of recovery, with no assurance that it will be done correctly either.

In Memphis, we were joined by Justin Pearson, one of the two Black state Senators expelled and then restored to the Tennessee State Senate. The senator spoke and answered questions from the students, who were overjoyed to meet and take pictures with him.

This year's trip educated, captivated, and activated both the youth and adults in attendance. The 40 high school attendees are transformed to appreciate their history, and will translate their experiences into further education, voting, leadership, and volunteerism. If we make them welcome, they will stay in Nebraska and prosper.

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