

TESTIMONY OF  
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THE NATIONAL GREAT BLACKS IN WAX MUSEUM  
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS AND PUBLIC LANDS  
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
U. S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

“THE NATIONAL GREAT BLACK AMERICANS COMMEMORATION ACT”  
H.R. 3967  
April 27, 2010

Chairman Raul M. Grijalva, Ranking Member Rob Bishop, and other Members  
of the Subcommittee.

I am Dr. Joanne M. Martin, co-founder with my late husband Dr. Elmer P. Martin of the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum in Baltimore, Maryland. It is my honor and privilege to address you today regarding our request to amend the National Great Black Americans Commemoration Act of 2004 to authorize appropriations through fiscal year 2015.

On June 1, 2004, legislation passed by voice vote on the floor of the House of Representatives, where Congressman Elijah Cummings (D, MD) sponsored it. The Senate version, sponsored by Senator Barbara Mikulski (D, MD) and Senator Orrin Hatch (R, UT), passed the Senate unanimously in July 2003, and again in June 2004. It was signed by President George Bush on June 22, 2004.

As you know, this legislation authorizes federal assistance for the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum and Justice Learning Center, a planned national center for outreach and education focusing on positive role models in the Black community. The museum will use the lessons of Black history to address violence, gang activity and substance abuse in the community. The institution will also develop exhibition-based programs to impart values and instill self-esteem.

The national museum initiative to help tell the story of great Black Americans began more than 20 years ago. Let me give you some background on the museum's origins.

**Brief History of the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum**

The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum, America's first wax museum of African

American history, was founded in 1983 by my late husband, Dr. Elmer Martin, and myself. However, our story really began in 1980 when, with money we were saving for a down payment on a house, we purchased four wax figures. We carried these to schools, churches, shopping malls, and festivals throughout the region, with the goal of testing public reaction to the idea of a black history wax museum. So positive was the public's response that in 1983, with personal loans, we opened the Museum in a small storefront in downtown Baltimore. The success of the Museum, especially among students on field trips, made it imperative that my husband and I find larger space. In 1985, we closed the museum and organized an aggressive fundraising effort to secure new and expanded space and to purchase more wax figures. These efforts allowed us to purchase an abandoned fire station on East North Avenue. After extensive renovations, we re-opened the museum in October 1988. We intentionally relocated to a fragile, low-income community to stimulate economic development, attract tourists to the area, foster community pride, and offer a safe haven for a select group of at-risk youth. We also wanted to provide opportunities for youth and other neighborhood residents to pursue careers in the Museum industry; and to promote economic development in the East North Avenue corridor.

When the Museum moved to its East Baltimore location, away from the lucrative Inner Harbor tourist market and very much off the beaten track, many told us that few people would venture into a deteriorating community to see a wax museum. Yet in 1989, the first full year of operation in its new location, 44,000 visitors ventured into the neighborhood to see the museum. The museum's visitorship increased steadily in subsequent years. Today, nearly a quarter million people from across the country and from other nations visit our unique cultural institution.

### **Why a Wax Museum?**

Some of you may question why a wax museum would be appropriate to help teach the public about the history of great Black Americans. My husband and I felt strongly about the significance of the wax medium in bringing public attention to the faces of people who are deserving of recognition. We believed that of all artistic mediums, wax created the closest likeness of the human face. Moreover, we felt that bringing the faces of great Black Americans into relief was one of the most important objectives of this museum, since historically, great Black Americans' likenesses, as well as their stories, have not been well known to the public.

Additionally, it is important to recognize that wax has traditionally been used in art and cultural institutions to depict significant people. The wax medium has long been recognized as a unique and artistic means to record human history through preservation of the faces and personages of people of prominence. Wax exhibits were used to commemorate noted figures in ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome, in medieval Europe, and in the art of the Italian Renaissance.

Approximately 200 wax figures and scenes, a 19<sup>th</sup> century slave ship re-creation, a special permanent exhibition on the role of youth in the making and shaping of history, a

Maryland room highlighting the contributions of outstanding Marylanders to African-American history, a gift shop, a mini auditorium for lectures and films are some of the major cultural features that comprise our present facility. The public's reaction to this wax museum speaks for itself. The *Afro American Newspaper* has declared the Great Blacks In Wax Museum a "National Treasure". In fact, the Museum does serve the entire nation. International visitors have come from France, Africa, Israel, Japan, and many other continents and nations. The Great Blacks In Wax Museum story has been heralded by news media around the world, including *CNN*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Sun Times*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *Kulturwelt*, *USA/Africa*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Crisis*, and *Essence Magazine*.

### **Future Plans of The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum and Justice Learning Center**

Our institution has embarked on a growth plan to refine its programs and vision. The result will be a city block long expansion of the Museum, the physical and economic revitalization of a significant section of the East North Avenue Corridor, and a museum that will serve as a national model for outreach and education, bringing positive change to at-risk youth and families, and community empowerment and renewal.

Today the community surrounding the Museum is on the verge of tremendous economic opportunity. The overall National Great Blacks In Wax Museum expansion will function as a cornerstone for the renewal of the Oliver Community.

In Fall 2013, just in time for its thirtieth anniversary, The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum will open a new \$35 million facility. The expansion and renovation project, designed by Davis Brody Bond Aedas Architects, includes the preservation of the buildings' historic brownstone masonry.

With 120,000 square feet of new construction and 43,000 square feet of rehabilitated space, the new facility more than triples the Museum's previous size, and will include 50,000 square feet of permanent and changing exhibition areas. The building will also feature a 3 story atrium entrance made of channel glass; nine thematic galleries; a high-tech education center with classrooms and a resource room; a library, research and genealogy center; a 200-seat auditorium for an array of educational programs; a sculpture garden offering space for events and programs; a green roof, museum store, and café.

Within the new facility, the Justice Learning Center will be the central outreach venue, operating for the benefit of families and youth from diverse backgrounds, with a special emphasis on serving at-risk youth. This will be a comprehensive local and nationwide effort. Key objectives of all Justice Learning Center programs will be workforce development, self-esteem enhancement, conflict resolution, violence prevention, literacy and academic skill development, and instilling pride in and responsibility for one's community. The Justice Learning Center will thus enhance our outreach and extend our services to those children and families who make up "non-traditional" and underserved

audiences for museums. It will extend outreach to homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, teen parent groups, senior citizen centers, adult day care facilities, youth residential homes and other venues where coming to a museum might be difficult or impossible or where the particular emphasis is on providing opportunities to low income and disadvantaged children and families. This resource will be a focal point for serving families and children within the criminal and juvenile justice system and creating a warm environment and experience during court-ordered visitations between parents and their children in out-of-home-care.

Within the Justice Learning Center, the Museum will mount a targeted marketing effort, new programming, and collaborations with local and national organizations to promote a comprehensive array of day, after school, weekend, and summer programs for the large numbers of youth and families with the most need and the least access to recreational, cultural, and educational resources. In the long run, these resources will go far in helping to offset some of the debilitating conditions which plague neighborhoods in particular and the wider society in general.

Current and planned program strategies include:

- To use the lessons, of black history to address such issues as drug and substance abuse, violence, teenage pregnancy, gang activity, and other forms of antisocial and delinquent activity.
- To expand the Museum's current focus on the role of youth in the struggle for civil rights and justice throughout history and the world.
- To develop exhibition-based programs designed to impart values and instill self-esteem.
- To create career-focused programs and opportunities through history, culture, and innovative partnerships.
- To extend the Museum's reach through technological innovation.

## **FUNDING REQUIRED FOR THE MUSEUM EXPANSION PROJECT**

The current budget estimate to expand existing museum facilities to create the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum and Justice Learning Center totals \$60 million dollars. This multi-year budget will cover demolition and removal of current dilapidated and unsafe structures, gutting and renovating an entire city block, rebuilding a three-story museum complex, architects, engineers, and related site development costs, and the costs of designing and constructing new museum exhibits.

Three-quarters of the funding for the museum expansion will be derived from nonfederal sources. These include the State of Maryland, which has already obligated over 5 million dollars for the expansion project. This effort was strongly supported by

former Governor Robert Ehrlich. As Mayor of Baltimore City and now Governor of the State, Martin O'Malley has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate his commitment to the project.

Another important funding source is the City of Baltimore which has obligated \$4.1 million dollars to date for the museum expansion. Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake is also committed to using her municipal resources to assist with costs of the expansion.

Much of the balance of the funding for the museum expansion will be contributed by the private sector. The National Great Blacks In Wax Museum has formed partnerships with such corporations as Exxon Mobil, Southwest Airlines, Macy's and Verizon. The Museum is also in close dialogue with a large number of private grant makers. These include major corporations such as AARP, Northwest Mutual Insurance, HP, Wal-Mart and others. We are also under consideration by major philanthropic foundations.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum, as well as the museum's many supporters throughout the City of Baltimore, the State of Maryland and across the country, I want to express our great appreciation for the opportunity to testify before the committee today. We appreciate the consideration of every member of this committee for our plans to establish a national museum addressing the legacy of great Black Americans, and to fulfill our commitment to creating possibilities from probabilities for today's youth.

I particularly want to express our appreciation to the sponsors of this legislation, Congressman Elijah Cummings and Senators Barbara Mikulski and Orrin Hatch, as well as the bipartisan group of House and Senate co-sponsors. We are convinced that this initiative will have a profound, positive impact on our ability to educate youth and the public about the contributions of great Black Americans and about American history.

Thank you for your consideration of our request to authorize appropriations that will provide assistance for the National Great Blacks In Wax Museum and Justice Learning Center. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.