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OPENING SHUTTERS

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ON DEEN DAY, THE sun rolled off a shelf and spread itself. Most years, Deen Day's hot enough to make majorettes trickle with sweat. The weather for this year's community celebration, which takes place in late September in the historic Hampton neighborhood of Aberdeen Gardens, was shaping up the same.

Hampton Mayor James Eason was smiling and waving from his spot in the half-hour parade that kicked off the day. Cameras flashed on sequins and brass as floats, bands and cheerleaders did a sassy strut down Aberdeen Road.

Two 15-year-old girls, Kristinia Washington and Larissa Spruill, gazed admiringly from the sidelines. Washington had her camera poised to shoot the approaching high school band.

Dozens of camera lenses were trained on the parade. But the two Bethel High School sophomores were part of a special group of picture-takers.

These best friends were among six Aberdeen residents whose neighborhood pictures were not destined just for a scrapbook. Instead, their most interesting prints would be enlarged, framed and displayed in a prestigious fine arts center for all the world to see.

They're part of ``Open Shutters: Photographic Impressions by African-Americans in Hampton Roads," a project that handed cameras to people in six predominantly black neighborhoods and asked them to record life there.

Sponsored by the Virginia Beach Center for the Arts, where the photos go on view Jan. 15, the project includes Seatack and Bayside in Virginia Beach, Park Place and Huntersville in Norfolk, and Portsmouth's Cavalier Manor.

``We wanted to provide a glimpse of the way minorities in Hampton Roads live, and what they care about, what they value in their communities," said Betsy Gough-diJulio, the center's education specialist who is overseeing the project.

``The idea was to not interpret that from the outside, but to let them express it."

The center modeled the program after three others. ``A Day in the Life of Black L.A." provided a photographic portrait of the city by 10 black photographers. ``Songs of My People" sent 50 black photographers across the country to capture life among black Americans.

A third program, ``Shooting Back," encouraged disadvantaged children to find expression and empowerment in photography. From ``Shooting Back," Gough-diJulio got the idea to put cameras in the hands of untrained photographers who live in the communities.

The amateur shooters were each given an automatic 35mm Nikon Fun Touch 3 camera and 16 rolls of film. Six local professional photographers - one per neighborhood - would help the untrained photographers.

During a three-week shoot, the local pros would spend time with the neophyte shooters, guiding their work and helping them select prints for exhibition. Four nationally known photographers also stepped in to inspire the community camera crew with a slide show of their own award-winning photos.

"I haven't got the feel of it yet," said Victor Hamilton at the project's onset. The 42-year-old high school geography teacher, one of Aberdeen's community shooters, had never felt comfortable taking pictures.

"But those (slide) presentations were fantastic," Hamilton said. "I have to admit I feel more pepped up."

The project has been a year in the planning and was kicked off by a \$20,000 grant from Metropolitan Life Foundation through its "multicultural initiatives" program, Gough-diJulio said. The gift pays for roughly half the expenses.

At first, the arts center planned to use only Virginia Beach sites, but decided to broaden the project as much as possible. A 10-member advisory committee chose neighborhoods at different socio-economic levels. Next, participants were selected in every age range.

"We tried for diversity, and for a balance," Gough-diJulio said. "We didn't want this to be a

project that strictly looked at disadvantaged communities. We wanted to span a greater cross-section."

Aberdeen Gardens has a reputation as a safe, middle-class community made up of church-going and professional people. "I feel very good about Aberdeen Gardens," said Mayor Eason. "It's been a good, solid neighborhood for many years."

In the last year, police will tell you, there were few problems to report: A bicycle and a car were stolen, and someone was caught with drugs. Other crimes took place, but not enough to make a person cower behind bolted doors.

Victor Hamilton was born in Aberdeen, lived away for 18 years, and returned in 1988.

"I've been blessed to live in Christian neighborhoods," Hamilton said. "But Aberdeen? I consider this a godly neighborhood."

All the communities involved in "Open Shutters" are special, but Aberdeen has extra reason to brag this year. In 1994, Aberdeen marks its 60th anniversary as the only model resettlement community in America built for African Americans through Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal program.

Two years ago, residents banded together to seek historic designation for Aberdeen. In February, the state named it a historic landmark. On May 26, the feds added Aberdeen to the National Register of Historic Places.

When the historic marker was erected in July in front of Aberdeen School - a sort of village commons for the neighborhood - it would be hard to imagine a prouder gathering.

Paige Washington, 50, an administrator with Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools, was among the neighborhood leaders who got the designation ball rolling. He's extra proud of Aberdeen, having been born in his house on Mary Peake Boulevard, named for a 19th century teacher who founded an area school for children of newly freed slaves.

Barrel-chested, upbeat Paige Washington is Kristinia's father; he also is a photographer for ``Open Shutters."

Washington felt drawn to veer out of Aberdeen and take pictures of the great Emancipation Oak, a site where the Emancipation Proclamation was read in 1863 and where Mary Peake is said to have conducted some classes.

But he's fondest of Aberdeen and likes to reel off its unique history.

Every home in Aberdeen originally was equipped with a huge fenced-in back yard for gardening, plus fruit trees and a chicken coop. A surrounding ``greenbelt" also was used for farming and for raising cows and pigs. To help homesteaders achieve self-sufficiency, the government distributed 12 mules, 12 cows, 1,000 laying hens and 25,000 baby chicks.

FDR ``wanted to make sure blacks had a place to raise their families, and be an integral part of

a community," Washington said.

The architect was an African American, Hilyard R. Robinson, then a professor at Howard University. The contractors and builders also were African American, with Hampton University students among them. For this reason, the neighborhood proudly adopted the slogan ``By Negroes, for Negroes."

These days, the motto ``By blacks, for blacks" still trips off the tongues of residents.

Prospective buyers were screened to ensure a community of responsible, healthy residents.

Washington's family moved from Buckingham County to Aberdeen in 1941; he moved away as an adult, then returned to the family home in 1986 after his parents died.

``It was a circle. Here I am back again. I was apprehensive. The memories were very deep.

``But here, I have a sense of place. I know my roots."

To him, nearly every Aberdeen house holds a story. There are the homes of the nurse who gave candy to children, the Boy Scout leader, the man who raised chickens.

There's the tidy brick home where baseball great Jackie Robinson ate dinner in the '40s. There's the childhood home of Hazel Reid O'Leary, now President Clinton's secretary of energy.

Another long-time Aberdeen resident, Claude Vann Jr., recalled how Eleanor Roosevelt showed up once to check out the neighborhood.

“She took Aberdeen on as a pet” project, Vann said. The government planned to build similar African-American communities across the nation, but they never were built. “They selected Hampton to be first because of the shipyard. Plus, there were a lot of slums in this area.”

In Aberdeen, all the parents look out for all the kids, Washington said. Both praise and punishment come in multiples. “Whoo! You could get three or four whippings on Halloween night just for running slow,” said Vann.

“You could say this community was based on African culture,” Washington said. “The community as a whole was everybody's family.”

The three teenage girls involved in “Open Shutters” - Kristinia Washington, Larissa Spruill and Shana Goodman - were hanging out after school in the Washingtons' den.

At 15, none of these girls can date. They are serious about their studies, expect to go to college and don't feel ready to start a relationship with a boy.

Washington and Spruill have been best buddies for two years. With ``Open Shutters," they have brought Goodman into their circle.

``Shana just added to our little clique," said Spruill, sweetly.

``The program has really gotten us together," added Washington. ``I've known Shana since elementary school, but we really never clicked."

``Now, it's like three sisters," said Spruill.

Goodman appeared warmed by the attention. ``And I always thought Larissa was one of those people you couldn't hang out with because she would think you're stupid," she said.

Washington and Goodman were looking over their first batch of prints, images of deacons and choir members, and of the latest fashions in mall shops. Sunsets at Fort Monroe, a wedding at Hampton University.

``I haven't seen any of mine yet," said Spruill. ``I took a picture of a mural at Burger King by Hampton University. It's real different, starts off with tribal musicians and goes to Louis Armstrong and Hammer.

``I'm kinda into my culture. I like Afrocentric stuff," she said.

Washington said she took pictures of fashions ``because it's amazing to me some of the stuff you see. Sizes 1 and 2. And me, not being so small."

She also took pictures of her family's lush backyard garden and their well-kept house. ``It's got a warmth to it. The fact that my grandparents lived here. They died before I was born, so I never got to meet them."

In the house on Mary Peake, she said, ``sometimes I feel they're around me."

Out in the 'hood, however, she has plenty of surrogate grandparents. ``Nothing bad has ever happened here. Maybe that's because everybody here is elderly. Sixties and seventies. I have a lot of people in my neighborhood who look after me and love me."

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