

Obama museum looks for a home

By Mindy Pennybacker
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Deloris Guttman, director of the Obama Hawaiian Africana Museum, said she'd rather not give her age, but did provide her best time — three hours and 38 minutes — in the Honolulu Marathon.

"I don't like my age, because I'm all about young people," the fit-looking Guttman said, her gold earrings swinging beneath her close-cropped grey hair as she walked through the Honolulu Hale Municipal Gallery, where selections from the museum's collection can be viewed through Saturday in honor of Black History Month.

"Our mission is teaching Hawaii schoolchildren in pre-K to 12th grade about diversity and the history of people of African descent in Hawaii," she said.

The idea, she added, stemmed from diversity workshops she conducted in Oahu schools in the 1990s, after learning of an African American fourth-grader who was bullied because of her race.

Guttman, who served on the committee that in 2014 submitted a proposal for a Barack Obama presidential library in Honolulu, is now seeking a permanent home for her nonprofit museum, originally founded as the African American Diversity Cultural Center Hawaii in 1997.

She changed the name in 2018 to honor the former president because, although Obama was born here, attended Noelani Elementary School, graduated from Punahou School and lived in several homes around Honolulu, "there (was) nothing bearing his name, not even a stone," Guttman said.

By contrast, Chicago, the city that won the bid for an Obama Presidential Center, boasts an "Obama kissing rock" where in 2012 a plaque was affixed to commemorate Barack and Michelle Obama's first date.

Guttman has submitted a proposal to the state Legislature seeking a \$1 million grant-in-aid for capital



Deloris Guttman, left, founder and curator of Obama Hawaiian Africana Museum, showed objects from the collection on temporary display at Honolulu Hale. Photos from the exhibit include Obama's parents, Stanley Ann Dunham Obama, above right, and Hussein Obama, and Barack Obama as a child with his grandfather Stanley Dunham at the beach, far left.



fund-
ing to procure a bigger space for the museum, currently housed in cramped, rented headquarters at 1311 Kapiolani Blvd., near Ala Moana Mall.

"We have only 900 square feet for our archives, myself and our student interns, who are volunteers, like me." There are also life-size, cardboard cutouts of Obama and Oprah Winfrey (a part-time Maui resident), which, she said, tourists stop by and take selfies with.

Some of the collection, she added, is also on display in Campbell and Radford High Schools and Moanalua Middle School.

For a possible permanent site, "We're looking at places where Obama lived," Guttman said, adding that another temporary option might be to find donated space in Kakaako near the

Obama mural at the corner of Kapiolani and Ward Avenue.

Guttman said she keeps in touch with Maya Soetoro-Ng, the president's younger sister, who teaches at the Spark M. Matsunaga Institute for Peace at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, and consults with the Obama Foundation's Leaders Program.

"I have been supportive of Ms. Guttman's efforts, (and) my brother is aware of the effort," Soetoro-Ng wrote in an email, "although (we) have not had the chance to see any of her work or exhibits, and can only applaud and mahalo her kind intentions."

The exhibit on view at Honolulu Hale is rich with photos of Obama and his family members, but it also profiles many other accomplished African Americans in Hawaii.

Included are jazz saxophonist John Coltrane, who served in the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor during World War II, photographed playing at an Oahu officers' club, and Anthony D. Allen, an escaped slave who sailed to Hawaii in 1810 as a ship's steward out of Boston and became an adviser to King Kamehameha I.

Washington Middle School now stands on Allen's former property; in

2015, the National Park Service deemed the site as "(meeting) the requirements for inclusion in the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom."

That, Guttman said, captures students' imaginations. "They ask, how can

the Underground Railroad go under the ocean?"

She smiled at a group of preschoolers who filed through the exhibit with their teachers, and pointed out an African drum, its wooden base carved with elegant figures, that she

bought in a village in Ghana.

"Drums connect us across all cultures," she said, "and we can be a resource for telling the world how to live in harmony and peace," she added of Hawaii's multicultural people.

PRESCHOOL

Continued from B1

picture in mind. ... It's about time we got started and we appreciate the opportunity to do so."

Private operators provide the bulk of early education in Hawaii although there are some preschool classrooms on public school campuses. The Department of Education offers preschool to about 1,600 students needing special education and the Executive Office on Early Learning oversees preschool classrooms with capacity for 880 children, due to expand to 1,100 next year. The federal Head Start program has funding for 2,200 preschoolers.

After Tuesday's joint hearing, leaders of the House Committees on Finance and Lower and Higher Education put off decision making until Tuesday at 2 p.m. to incorporate feedback from a range of stakeholders.

"We've had a lot of meaningful testimony, so we're going to massage it for a little bit," said Education Chairman Justin Woodson, highlighting broad agreement on its ultimate goal. "You have the House, you have the Senate, you have the governor's office, you have private sector, non-

profits, you have community organizations all coming together saying that this is a goal that we want to accomplish," he said.

In written testimony, the Hawaii Democratic Party opposed the bill, arguing that safety and quality should not be sacrificed in a rush to open more preschools, given the lack of trained

staff available. It also opposed the use of taxpayer money to subsidize for-profit businesses.

Some questions remain about the legal technicalities of the plan. Preschool Open Doors is a "child care subsidy" program administered by the Department of Human Services, rather than an educational one. In 2014, Hawaii voters rejected a proposed constitutional amendment that would have allowed the state to spend public funds on private preschool programs.

Rep. Chris Todd (D, Hilo-Waiakea-Keaukaha) asked whether there is a constitutional concern if the state "essentially subsidized" a religious preschool education, but no one from the Attorney General's Office was present to answer.

Corey Rosenlee, president of the Hawaii State Teachers Association, testified that the union fully supports expanding access to preschool but four barriers need to be addressed: having enough

personnel, facilities, the cost and maintaining quality.

"We do believe though that if we are going to expand, it should be done through a public rather than a private model," he said. "We believe that the public model would be able to do it cheaper and better than a private model."

Superintendent Christina Kishimoto encouraged legislators to expand public preschool options, saying classrooms are available at various public schools.

Lauren Moriguchi, director of the Executive Office on Early Learning, stressed the need for quality and the workforce challenges.

"One of the things we've learned from our program as well as our collaborative work across private and public partners in the field is that most if not all of us cannot find enough qualified staff to expand quickly," she said.

Funding amounts are left blank in the bill. It would create a "Preschool Open Doors trust fund" to receive fees, grants, donations and legislative funds, and a "Preschool Grant Program Special Fund" to support private entities.

"We hope for a powerful combination of philanthropic, social sector dollars and government sector dollars in amounts that really will be able to allow us to move the needle a lot on this," said Terrence George, who co-chairs an early education committee for the Executive Collaborative.



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