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Gantt Center hosts Bernard Kinsey discussion

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Bernard Kinsey has spent a lifetime dispelling myths.

On Monday, Kinsey, of Los Angeles, returns to Charlotte to dispel myths he says surround African-Americans' place and role in U.S. history dating to the late 1500s. Kinsey will speak at a lecture and panel discussion at the Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts + Culture. The talk is titled, "What you didn't learn in high school History: A lecture and panel discussion that sheds light on the 'Myth of absence'."

Kinsey will be joined by Tom Hanchett, the staff historian for the Levine Museum of the New South. The discussion will be moderated by Mike Collins of WFAE.

The Gantt Center is host to The Kinsey Collection, an art and history exhibit, through Oct. 12.

Kinsey speaks about the "hole in the heart" of many African-Americans that exists, he believes, because many feel they are missing a sense of self, a sense of where they came from and where their roots extend to.

"What I want to accomplish in these talks," said Kinsey, "is just what our Jewish brothers and sisters have done. Remember and honor our ancestors and tell their stories."

Kinsey is adamant that blacks in American history books and lessons have not received an accurate portrayal, and he looks to use the platform afforded him through his collection of African-American artifacts, historical documents and art acquired over 28 years as testament to a true narrative. He is interested in getting his message to young people so they will better understand how historic black values were shaped and the people that shaped them. One of Kinsey's fears is that there is a risk of losing history through ignorance and not perpetuating the telling of important accomplishments of those that came before us.

Personalities and voices

"Instead of embracing our culture and heritage," said Kinsey, "many black folks are ashamed of our history.

• Discuss together

What: "What you didn't learn in high school history" lecture and panel discussion.

When: 6 p.m. Monday, followed by reception at 8 p.m.

Where: Knight Theater, 430 S. Tryon St.
Reception at the Gantt Center, 551 S. Tryon St.

Tickets: \$20.

Details: www.ganttcenter.org.

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Because of the lack of knowledge, our children do not know who we are and where we come from. My goal in holding these discussions across the country is to use artifacts and factual documents to illustrate the great number of positive contributions blacks have made to the development of America. I want to dispel the “Myth of Absence” that silently states that blacks were somehow invisibly present but did not participate in historical events that shaped America.”

Kinsey’s talk, one he has given at churches, universities and lecture halls, puts names, personalities and voices to those individuals who have escaped mainstream history lessons yet have contributed to the American narrative.

- Harriet Jacobs, a runaway slave referred to as the “American Anne Frank.” She chronicled her ordeal in an 1862 biography (part of his collection) of how she spent seven years in a small attic avoiding an oppressive and sexually abusive slave holder.
- Estaban Dorantes, an African explorer, in 1537 was the first person to discover the Deep South, New Mexico and Arizona 300 years before Lewis and Clark.
- Black jockey Jimmy Winkfield, who rode winners in the Kentucky Derby in 1901 and 1902.

Challenging myths

Kinsey puts many myths about the African-American experience on trial.

He differentiates between stories that have been told so often they are accepted as facts, and facts that have never been fully told and therefore are almost lost. He points to African-American patriot Israel Bissell, who rode 346 miles from Boston to Philadelphia to warn the colonies of the British invasion before Paul Revere, who rode 19 miles from Boston to Concord with the message.

African-Americans played an outsized role in settling the American Southwest, according to data Kinsey has uncovered. Of the 38,000 working cowboys in the Southwestern U.S. between 1870 and 1885, one in four were African-American – or about 10,000 black cowboys.

He even challenges the notion that the Pilgrims first settled the new world. He has evidence of a recently discovered marriage certificate released by the Catholic Diocese of an African couple from 1598 and the oldest known birth certificate of an African boy born in St. Augustine, Fla., in 1606.

“I want to help African-Americans learn to embrace their history instead of being ashamed of it and their ancestors,” said Kinsey. “I want this collection to motivate, educate and inspire folks to be proud of the African-American experience. We come from a great place.”



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