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Mark is currently reading *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury.

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Alexandria Library Celebrates Sit-In Anniversary

At the Alexandria (Va.) Library, we liked to call it the most important civil rights event you've probably never heard of. That needed to change. The sit-in at the Alexandria Library took place decades before the more famous one in 1960 at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. In Alexandria in 1939, five young African American citizens politely attempted to exercise their rights as city residents to register for library cards at the new Barrett Branch Library (BBL). Library policy at that time was to only offer services to white residents. As each young man was refused service, he took up a book, found a seat, and began to read. Initially uncertain as to how to deal with this situation, library staff eventually called the police and two officers arrived to escort the men off the premises. The five were charged with disorderly conduct, a charge that Samuel Wilbert Tucker, their attorney and sit-in organizer, looked forward to refuting in a court of law.

Tucker had been trying for some time to convince the city that services should be available to all citizens, regardless of color. The municipal government dragged its feet and prolonged the court case they did not want adjudicated. After Tucker became seriously ill and had to leave the case, the city negotiated a settlement. In 1940 the city agreed to construct a separate library for its African American residents. This "separate but equal" solution was not one that Tucker would or could support. However, Alexandria's African American community largely supported the plan and accepted the compromise.

The white media mostly ignored the story, while at the same time African American newspapers across the country reported on the trial's progress to their interested readership.

Sixty years later, a short documentary was made and a plaque placed inside the BBL lobby to commemorate the event. Ten years after that, the library decided to hold its own commemoration and underscore the changes and progress that seventy years had brought to the institution.

A Need to Remember History

It is something of an understatement to say that the City of Alexandria has a rich and full past. At different times the city has played home to such famous people as George Washington, Robert E. Lee, John L. Lewis, and Gerald R. Ford. But the city has also been a major entrepôt for companies like Franklin & Armfield, one of the largest slave-trading firms in antebellum America. Slaves from the area were collected here to be shipped and "sold down the river," to points across the Deep South. Franklin & Armfield's Alexandria office, now a registered historic landmark owned by the Northern Virginia Urban League, has been rechristened "Freedom House." The building still stands at 1315 Duke Street, less than a half a mile from BBL. In popular culture, the desegregation of the Alexandria City Public Schools was depicted in *Remember the Titans*, a movie "based on a true story" starring Denzel Washington as the coach who united his racially divided team in 1971. Although the film played fast and loose with the facts in order to create a more dramatic story arc, the picture

of Alexandria and Virginia as being slow in accepting racial equality is not too much of a stretch.

African American history is Alexandria history. The two are inseparable. The First Federal Census of 1790 listed a black population of 595, or 21.7 percent of the city's total population.¹ Today, the latest U.S. Census reports that 22 percent percent of city residents are African American.² So, more than 200 years of legal and extralegal oppression, of institutional unfairness, of "separate and unequal" have not diminished Alexandria's African American population in any way. It may have been a long road, but change has happened. In the new millennium, Alexandria elected its first black mayor, William D. Euille. The Alexandria Library also welcomed its first African American director, Rose T. Dawson.

The twenty-first century has seen the Alexandria Library rededicate itself to improving services for all city residents. Alexandria Library's Special Collections/Local History branch has published a five-volume *Virginia Slave Births Index, 1853–1865*.³ This work indexes microfilm held at the Library of Virginia in Richmond and saves genealogical researchers time and effort in locating their ancestors. Likewise, numerous documents from Alexandria's past having relevance to African American history have been posted to the Special Collections website. The same branch has created an online guide to their African American resources and is always trying to improve and expand those resources.

But what of the library sit-in that few have ever heard of? In the late 1990s, library staff worked closely with a young documentary filmmaker named Matt Spangler to provide information and background for his film, *Out of Obscurity*.⁴ The documentary re-creates the sit-in on the original site, inside the Alexandria Library itself. As the title of the documentary suggests, this is a film about bearing witness to a previously ignored and little remembered struggle. DVDs of the documentary were added to the collection and circulated. In 2000, some interested library users may have noticed a new commemorative plaque placed in the BBL lobby.

A Need for Remaking History

Dawson wondered why the Alexandria Library did not actively celebrate the unique historical event that was the 1939 sit-in. Dawson had worked at the neighboring District of Columbia Public Library for years, and yet she had never heard of the sit-in. After becoming director of libraries in Alexandria, she asked staff to explore a way to commemorate the event, whose seventieth anniversary was not too distant. Coincidentally, Audrey Davis, curator of the Office of Historic Alexandria's Black History Museum, had recently shared some related information with library staff. Davis spoke to George K. Combs, the manager of the library's Special Collections Branch, about a teacher at the new Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School in town who had directed her students in a reenactment of the historic event. Another teacher had even provided a musical score. Combs, early on in the planning stage, began to see that there was an opportunity worth grabbing with both hands.

Combs liked the idea of inviting the teacher and her class to do an encore performance of their reenactment, but this time on the actual site of the event, the Alexandria Library. The students' participation would provide the perfect centerpiece for a commemorative program. The August date of the event fell during the Tucker school year, so the kids would have to come all the way across town to participate. Despite having to disrupt their school day, or perhaps because of it, the kids were excited to be a part of the library program, and reprise their roles.

After the first official planning session for the seventieth anniversary event, it became clear that the target audience would be all city residents and interested persons—young and old, black and white. Alexandria history was for everyone.

A Plan for Remaking History

George I. Schwartz, then communications officer at Alexandria Library, made it a personal goal to have at least one hundred

people attend the event and get coverage by as much of the local media as possible. His tools would be:

- two press releases, before and after the event;
- a traditional invitation by mail;
- a flier of the almost famous photograph of the young men being escorted from the library;
- social media, such as the Alexandria Library's Facebook and Twitter pages;
- and, of course, email.

There were no funds for anything else.

During the seven years prior to the event, Schwartz had organized reopening events for two branch libraries that had gone through major renovations. Although he was using more electronic communication tools than ever before, Schwartz still believed that many people would like to receive a traditional invitation through the mail. In this instance he decided that politeness should trump expediency. Schwartz would make certain there were enough programs to hand out at the ceremony so that people would have something to take with them. Further journeying down the paper trail, Combs would work with the local post office to issue a special commemorative cancellation.

Although this was an Alexandria Library event, libraries by their very nature are known for sharing: their books, their spaces, and their programs. The Alexandria City Hall, the Library Board, the Alexandria City Public Schools, the Office of Historic Alexandria, and even an employee known for his vocal talents were all to be involved in what had started as a library event. Davis would bring several educational displays and souvenirs for the students. Since we had no budget to speak of, The Friends of the Barrett Branch agreed to provide refreshments for our student participants.

Several days before the commemoration, local media picked up on the press releases. The *Alexandria Gazette* ran a teaser for the anniversary; the local cable company wanted to film the event; a senior center called and asked if twenty-five seats could be reserved for their residents; and

a local radio station interviewed Combs on the history behind the anniversary event. Staff wondered how BBL would fit the crowd we were now expecting.

The Big Event

On the day of our commemorative event, August 21, 2009, a *Washington Post* reporter was the first to arrive, quickly followed by a camera operator from the local cable company. The post office staff arrived and set up their booth, and the Alexandria Black History Museum staff brought their educational displays. Until the moment the program began, Schwartz was still placing chairs that the BBL staff members were pulling in from all the other library branches. Vice Mayor Kerry Donley joked that it was nice to see a "standing room only crowd" for a sit-in celebration. The crowd filled the children's area and the lobby leading to it. Youngsters offered their seats to seniors, and everyone shuffled closer together in good natured fellowship. During the program, Schwartz counted more than two hundred people in a diverse crowd composed of students, parents, professionals, and neighborhood folks, from both the black and white communities. When Dawson, who ably served as our emcee, asked the crowd if those friends and family of "the five brave young men who sat down to read a book" would stand, a dozen stood and waved.

Epilogue to a Reenactment

Going into the commemoration, Alexandria Library had the programming objective that one hundred people attend the seventieth anniversary event and that the *Alexander Gazette* pick up the story. The *Gazette* ran the story, filled with photographs. Coverage began with a color photo on page one and extended to a further two pages inside.

The icing on the anniversary cake, however, was that the event made the cover of the *Washington Post's* Alexandria/Arlington section. Both the *Gazette* and the *Post* ran pictures of the students reenacting the photo of the young men being escorted

from the library in 1939. Over the next year, all those items that were so close to not being ready for the anniversary program (but miraculously were) continue to be checked out, collected, marveled at, and appreciated. Two new webpages were added to the library's website: (1) a short history of the sit-in itself and (2) a commemorative page about the seventieth anniversary event. Both pages are accessible from the navigation bar of the Alexandria Library's homepage and appear on every page that has a navigation bar.

In a 2010 *Washington Post* article, the Alexandria Library was highlighted as having the Washington, D.C. area's highest "library card quotient."⁵ This means that Alexandria has the highest percentage of citizens with library cards in the greater Washington region. In a follow-up story, the Alexandria Library sit-in was cited as another exceptional fact about the library system.

In July 2010, Combs won a Virginia Public Library Directors Association award for his work on the program commemorating the seventieth anniversary of the sit-in. One month later, Dawson received the prestigious Distinguished Service to the Library Profession Award at the National Conference of African American Librarians of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (ALA), in part, due to the success of the anniversary program.

Awareness of the sit-in is growing slowly, both among city residents and the greater American public. The blogosphere and various wikis reach a greater audience than the library itself can. Combs' sister Elaine, a lawyer by training, became so fascinated by the story of the sit-in that she authored the *Wikipedia* entries for both it and Tucker.

Whether the Alexandria Library civil rights sit-in is recognized as the first library sit-in is a point of some contention. In February 2010, a local paper in Petersburg, Virginia, ran a headline: "The 50th Anniversary of the Petersburg Library Sit-In, the First of the Civil Rights Era."⁶ The article also reported that ALA marked this protest at the McKenney Library as the first library sit-in held in the nation. As of

this writing, no documentation has been found for the newspaper's claim.

Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School continues to teach their students about the Alexandria Library sit-in, explaining to their students the great role these five young men played in the struggle for equality. In a school as diverse as Tucker, it makes sense that the cover of the *Washington Post* featuring a photo of the school's students reenacting the event has pride of place in the front lobby.

The Alexandria Library event is listed first in a Google search of "library civil rights sit-in." Through the hard work of library staff and their community partners, the story of five brave young African Americans who sat down to read a book emerges out of obscurity. ■

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