

## Belva King Preserves History

By Erin Jones

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Up the spiral staircase, visitors to the C. Burr Artz Public Library in downtown Frederick, Maryland will find the Maryland Room. The space is a miniature library within the library, a rich collection of local history in the form of primary and secondary sources.

At a table in the back, local historian Belva King, 80, laid down a sunflower-colored tablecloth with delicate trimming, and against this vibrant backdrop, she displayed a portion of her collection of black-and-white photos, family trees, historic documents and otherwise the names and faces of Frederick locals now gone.

The artifacts represent a small sampling of the many stories and names she has preserved throughout her life in Frederick. She is at the library today to talk with *The News-Post* about her mission.

Joining her at the table are Elizabeth Comer, president of the Catoclin Furnace Historical Society, and Makala Harrison, a graduate student and former CFHS docent interpreter who is now with the nearby Thurmont Historical society. The two of them have joined forces to ensure King's work survives the transition into the digital age and remains accessible to the public.

The Catoclin Furnace Historical Society website has a page dedicated to King's work, called "African-American History in Frederick County, Maryland — Belva's Museum Artifacts." The site now hosts over 2,000 digitized pages of an email newsletter King wrote over 13 years. Harrison recently undertook the task of digitizing a box of DVDs and creating a 16-video YouTube playlist of King's work.

"These are true Frederick County treasures," Comer said. "All we wanted to do was be the mouthpiece to put them somewhere."

King, over the years, has captured her own memories, conducted interviews, collected photos and mapped genealogies. She also obtained permission from *The Frederick News-Post* to search its archives and reprint articles that highlight African-American lives over the years.

She doesn't just preserve and capture the stories of others but tells the story of her own family as well.

King spent much of her childhood, between 1950 and 1965, in the neighborhood that is now Shab Row in Frederick. In one video about Shab Row, she stands in front of her childhood home at 315 East Church Street. She talks about her parents, Edna and Leonard Diggs, and her two sisters and brother. Her mother worked at a sewing company and her father was a World War II veteran who later worked in sanitation at Fort Detrick and managed a little league baseball team.

As she recalls growing up there, she vividly recounts the sounds of the neighborhood, the loud Everedy Company factory across the street, and the strumming of her neighbor playing his guitar in the backyard.

The neighborhood has changed, but the names, faces and stories of her neighborhood, and many Frederick County communities like hers, are preserved thanks to her efforts.

King always loved storytelling and history, she said, but it was her grandfather, Walter Bowie, who inspired her to begin the work of chronicling the local history around her.

"My Grandfather inspired me to gather news articles about Frederick and African-American history," King wrote in her newsletter. "I loved my Grandfather and wanted to give back something to our community."

Bowie was the founder of the all-Black Bartonsville Band, which started in 2011. Also, in the Bartonsville Band was his younger brother Lester Bowie, the acclaimed jazz trumpet player and composer. He is now memorialized in mural form on South Market Street in Frederick, a creation of artist Rafael Blanco.

From a little girl, King was captivated by watching the band play. "I just wanted to do something for Frederick like my grandfather did something. I used to be that little girl seeing him marching in the

band. I was so tickled to see that, and I wanted to do something,” King said.

King attended Lincoln High School, historic for being the first high school for African-American students in Frederick County. She attended Lincoln High until her senior year, when the county’s integration plan moved her to Frederick High School. She graduated in 1963.

Stories of Lincoln High feature in both her newsletters and in her video collection. Recordings from the class of 1963’s 30th and 40th reunions now appear in the YouTube playlist. She was aided in the project by Roger Rollins, who she said inspired her to continue making videos.

She also created several videos in a documentary style with the help of Stelman King and Michael North. The videos feature interviews, King’s recollections and photos.

“I just thought it needed to be done,” King said. “Who knows us more than us? We know ourselves. We know us.”

King began her newsletter, *Belva’s Museum Artifacts*, in 2005, upon her retirement from a 20-year career with National Geographic. The newsletter was distributed via email to an audience of about 350, as well as in printed copies.

In 2008, she won the Maryland African American Preservation Award. The plaque reads: “Belva King Historian. For your recognized accomplishments in the field of education and preservation.”

The Frederick County Human Relations Commission awarded her a Certificate of Recognition the following year, “For conspicuous service in the cause of the defense and promotion of Human Rights in Frederick County.”

In 2019, the Maryland Historic Trust awarded King an Outstanding Individual Leadership award.

It was while working on the newsletter that King first connected with Elizabeth Comer. She would call her to ask if anything was happening at the Catoctin Historical Society, and Comer would send her entries for the newsletter.

Comer joined King’s efforts, first in taking several of the videos to be remastered at Cappel Video on East Patrick Street. She quickly became captivated by the stories she learned in the process.

“We all know ‘he who hesitates is lost,’ and if you wait to do an oral history or make a video or produce that information, once it’s gone, it’s gone,” Comer said. Comer hopes King’s efforts can serve as a model for other communities to preserve their history for future generations.

Says Comer, “What Belva has done is really a model for community-based history. It’s organic. Belva knew this area. She knew Shab Row. She knew Bartonsville. She was able to not come in from the outside but capture that information and record it for posterity. It really is truly a model for other communities.”

The trio shares a laugh over how many times the CFHS website has crashed in the few months it has been live, a testament to both the scope of the history and the demand in web traffic.

Harrison estimates she has spent over 100 hours digitizing and uploading the videos. At times, the computer was working so hard, she says, it sounded like a giant wind turbine. “I thought my computer was about to take off into space.”

The videos and newsletters are now successfully uploaded and available for all to enjoy.

The first entry of the newsletter includes an article by Adelaide Dixon Hall, written in 1987. Its opening passage is applicable to King’s body of work: “As I sit and review the scenes of my childhood, I feel there were many beautiful, strong black men and women who were the forerunners of colored life (as it was called then) here in Frederick and are worth mentioning. These good and faithful souls who have gone on to glory made history here in our town. They stand out in my memory for they had little means and the odds were great but their pluck and perseverance should never be forgotten.”