

Du Bois Center in Great Barrington shows black history is getting its due

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Just 10 years ago, the name W.E.B. Du Bois did not ring many bells in the area. Despite being a Harvard graduate and leading philosopher on education and equality of the races, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois' legacy was largely ignored, mostly because of his radical politics later in life.

Today, the man whom Martin Luther King Jr. called a "tireless explorer and gifted discoverer of social truths" is proudly known as the Berkshires' own native son. According to Randy Weinstein, director of the W.E.B. Du Bois Center in Great Barrington, that is just as it should be.

"He has now become the standard," Weinstein said. "When you see his name in the paper, you automatically say 'oh' and move on. For the center to be part of the fabric of the community in such a short time is quite remarkable."

The Du Bois Center opened five years ago and is celebrating its fifth anniversary with a variety of public performances, films and discussions, each dedicated to local black history and heritage in February -- Black History Month. But it is not the only physical monument honoring the late philosopher. A giant mural (which was recently repainted), as well as the W.E.B. Du Bois Homesite on Route 23 are among several locations that honor black heritage in the Berkshires.

Rachel Fletcher, co-director of the Upper Housatonic Valley African

American Heritage Trail, said awareness of this rich heritage continues to grow among visitors and locals alike.

"It's very clear that there is a slow and steady growth in visitors to the various sites and events," she said. "The number of events as well as the attendance at these events has increased. There are local people, people from Boston and New York. Things are definitely moving. It's not just about history, but it's also about making these sites part of the landscape of Berkshire County."

The heritage trail, which runs through 29 towns from Williamstown down to Warren, Conn., contains 48 sites, including the Rev. Samuel Harrison House in Pittsfield, Jacob's Pillow Dance in Becket and the Ashley House in Ashley Falls. In addition to honoring the physical landmarks of the underground railroad, Du Bois' childhood home, black churches and well-established communities, the trail also pays homage to the many luminaries and historical figures who have contributed to the area's rich black history over the last three centuries.

That past, according to historian David Levinson, editor of "African American Heritage in the Upper Housatonic Valley," was once in danger of being buried and forgotten.

"Studying African-American life in the Berkshires ... is a difficult task," he said in an e-mail. "We have accomplished (this) to some extent only because so many dedicated people have been involved. Most of what there is to know is buried in documents stored in local libraries and historical societies. So, it's a matter of lots of searching and detecting to find what there is and then organizing it into a compelling narrative."

This compelling narrative is what drives Fletcher to continue to reach out to the public in the name of history.

"When you think of the luminaries of Berkshire County, it isn't all white anymore," she said. "The historical landscape is very different. When you look at black history, it isn't part of the official historical record. Our links to that past were slowly vanishing. For many years, this was regarded as a small segment of our community in the Berkshires. Now, Du Bois is the only person pictured on the Great Barrington 250th Anniversary flag. That

recognition is what I am most proud of."

In addition to the trail itself, black heritage also has become part of the mainstream curriculum at several area schools, including Conte Community School in Pittsfield. Francis Jones-Sneed, a history professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, is the mastermind behind the school curriculum, which focuses on area black history.

"It has evolved really marvelously over the last five years," she said. "The Conte school has a K through 5 program with units on the luminaries of the African-American Heritage Trail, including Du Bois, Mumbet, Samuel Harrison and Agrippa Hull. These lessons really bring local history to life."

In fact, it is this educational arm that Weinstein said is the most compelling aspect of the Du Bois Center.

"I particularly enjoy having students from Simon's Rock or Williams come down here," he said. "They work on their thesis papers and camp out for the day, and we talk history and Du Bois. When people come here, it leads to a curiosity about his life. People want to be in the know."

Weinstein said this curiosity is what inspired him to make the special events and programs at the center a little less esoteric and a lot more accessible to the general public.

"Now it's become another place to visit," he said. "People take their family to Chesterwood, the Norman Rockwell Museum and now the Du Bois Center. The programs and events are more innovative and less specialized -- more for general consumption."

Du Bois is not the only pivotal character in the history of Berkshire County. Levinson cites several key figures as essential to a history lesson that has yet to find its way into a standardized textbook.

"African-American history and culture in the Berkshires is important because several influential African-Americans lived here -- W.E.B. Du Bois, Elizabeth 'Mumbet' Freeman, Samuel Harrison, James Weldon Johnson," he said. "It is also very much worth knowing about because learning about the lives of ordinary people tells about life in New England and the United

States at various times in American history."