



Washington Street YMCA memorial project takes another step forward



COURTESY MONTCLAIR HISTORY CENTER The Washington Street YMCA was an institution in Montclair, helping young black men build character and physical health and intellect since the early 1900s.

By ERIN ROLL

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A memorial to Montclair's former Washington Street YMCA is getting a little closer to reality.

The YMCA was razed in 2005 to make way for Charles H. Bullock School, which opened in 2010.

The Washington Street YMCA memorial committee, represented by Karen Christmas Solomon and her father Elvoid Christmas, have donated \$5,800 to the Montclair Board of Education for a plaque to memorialize the institution that helped young black men form character, and physical health and intellect since the early 1900s.

Charles Harmon Bullock, a prominent leader in the early 20th Century Colored Young Men's Christian Association movement, created YMCAs throughout the U.S and later served as director of the YMCA in Montclair from 1916 until his retirement in 1935.

The Washington Street YMCA Memorial Committee has been raising money to set up a memorial to the demolished YMCA building, once an important and well-loved institution for Montclair's black community.

The money will be used to have a bronze memorial plaque made and mounted to the side of the school.

The committee had initially approached the township in 2017 to ask about having a memorial plaque set up, before the township told them that the matter would have to be brought to the BOE.

From the 1920s, the Washington Street YMCA, which was known among many in Montclair as the Colored Y, was known in town as a safe place for African-American children to spend their free time.

"It was possible to have three parents, like me: a mother, a father, and the YMCA," Christmas said in his address to the BOE.

Christmas remembered that the YMCA would bring in influential black leaders in the community to speak, and would organize dances with the YWCA on Glenridge Avenue. He added that soldiers learned to swim at the YMCA before being deployed overseas in World War II.

In a prior interview with Montclair Local, Christmas remembered that the YMCA was a place where children learned to respect adults, and were respected in return.

Although African-American children could attend the main YMCA on Park Street in the 1960s, they didn't feel entirely welcome there, he said.

"The Washington Street Y was our North Star," he said. "May it always be remembered and never forgotten."

Everett Christmas, Elvoid's brother, worked as an administrator for the Y, starting in the 1960s and continuing through his retirement in 1996. His career took him from the Washington Street Y up through the national YMCA organization.

The board voted unanimously to accept the donation, with the expectation that it will be allowed to review and approve the plaque's design.

Board President Laura Hertzog commented that the project had been a long time in the works.

Board member Jessica de Koninck said that by the time the building was demolished, it was in poor condition. "It's very difficult for the stars to align to let us build a new school building," she said.