Retired teacher Odell S. Williams, left, sits with Sade Roberts-Joseph at the museum named in Williams’ honor. Roberts-Joseph is founder and curator of the Odell S. Williams ‘Now And Then African American Museum.’

Celebrating hard work

Baton Rouge church starts African-American museum to honor retired teacher, member's educational efforts

Unsung HEROES

Editor's note: Unsung Heroes is an occasional feature highlighting dedicated church members. If you know someone who should be featured, write The Advocate, P.O. Box 568, Baton Rouge, LA 70821. Attention: Religion.

By COURTNEY ROBINS
(To The Advocate)

Odell Sanders Williams had a hard time doing something that should have been simple—helping black students get information about their history.

Williams, an elementary teacher in the East Baton Rouge Parish public school system for 40 years, had to scavenge for the information. Books provided by the school system in the 1950s and 1960s had scant if any information about black history. And, even teaching African American history was not encouraged, she said.

“The feeling passed on by those in authority was that they couldn’t see any reason for teaching about it,” Williams said.

She taught her students “through song, books, posters and any information, I could get my hands on,” Williams said.

Her church, New St. Luke Baptist, has honored Williams' efforts by turning their old church building into a museum that not only celebrates Williams but also African American history.

“Of course this is God working,” the 81-year-old Williams said. "It had to have been.”

These common household items on display are said to have been invented by African Americans.

... years, there are so many things you learn. Not only about your ancestors, but everyday life people," Thompson said.

The museum opened in March with a number of different private donations from the community, the West Baton Rouge Museum and area.

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I always wanted to make a difference in young people’s lives and my children.
— Odell S. Williams

Left: More artifacts on display. Above: Portraits of great African Americans line the walls of the museum, Odell S. Williams would show them to students after school because she was not allowed to during the day.

Williams donated many of the materials she used while teaching.

"I think it is a good idea that a church is doing this. Children can get to know about their history as well as their spiritual development," she said.

The museum focuses on four subjects: African Artifacts, Faces of Great African American Achievers, Rural Artifacts and Minority Inventions.

They run the gamut, from a washboard and soap to various pieces of artwork, an alarm clock to paper preserves to corn and quilts.

The museum is also the site of a weekly workshop, held from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays, called the Speech and Drama Guild directed by Gloria H. Stewart.

Children are taught various forms of speech in preparation for public speaking engagements.

Williams, a native of Lorman, Miss., came to Baton Rouge with her parents in 1929. She graduated from McKinley High School. She later got a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a master’s degree.

She started teaching in 1948.

"Back in those days, it was hard for blacks, especially a woman. I always wanted to make a difference in young people’s lives and my children," Williams said. "We need to know where we come from and where we are going. History is so great. It’s a passage into life’s journeys as well as travels.

"By teaching my students about the past, I hope to expand as well as enhance their knowledge on life," she said.

"This museum is an honor, especially for others to see and learn. And I’m still here to see it," she said.

During her career she taught at Reddy, McKinley and University Terrace elementary schools.

Williams said she was stunned when she was told the museum would be named after her.

Sadie Roberts-Joseph, the founder and curator of the museum, said Williams efforts to teach black history when it wasn’t popular made her an easy choice.

The Rev. Joseph Armstrong, pastor of the church, said, "This is a great project not only for Mrs. Williams, but the community to give back to the community as well as show our heritage to old and young. She is truly a legend and sets the example for others.

There are plans to expand the museum, Roberts-Joseph said.

"We expect more growth as well as more visitors to see what we have to offer," she said. "Culture is the glue that holds a people together, that steps back in time and lets you look into the future."