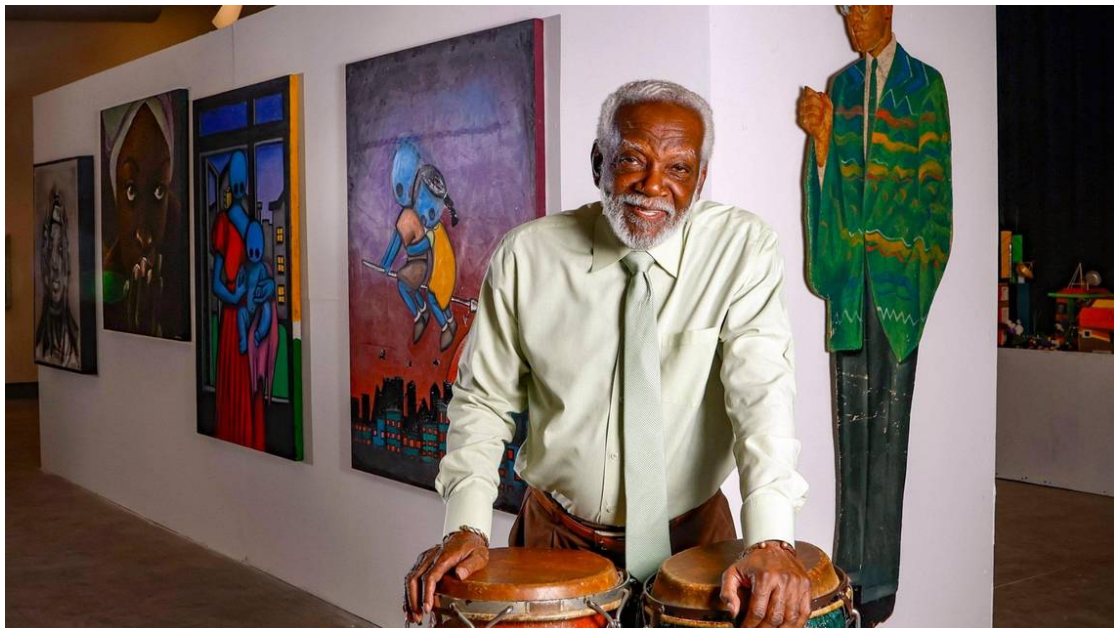


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‘Cultural icon.’ Marshall Davis has been nurturing young Black artists in Miami for 40 years

BY C. ISIAH SMALLS II

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Marshall Davis is celebrating 40 years as director of the African Heritage Cultural Arts Center in Miami, Florida on Friday, December 15, 2023. AL DIAZ adiaz@miamiherald.com

Liberty City was never the same after the 1980 McDuffie Riots.

Businesses laid in ruins. Shop owners fled the neighborhood. And there was [more than \\$100 million worth of damage](#) that needed to be addressed.

Roughly 15 blocks away from the heart of the damage was the Model City Cultural Center and by 1983, the facility was without a director. Enter Marshall Davis Sr., a man intent on using art to transform his community.

“Art helps you develop yourself as a person,” Davis said. “There are so many beneficial experiences from the arts that help you out academically. So if you learn how to play an instrument or read music, you’re doing fractions.”

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Through a combination of summer and after-school programs, students get a chance to nurture their artistic side – regardless of discipline or competency. The Liberty City complex quite literally has something for everybody – a theater, concert hall, dance studio, gallery – giving students the opportunity to discover and hone their passions. And because of Davis, it's now called [the African Heritage Cultural Center](#).

The name is “reflective of the community where we reside, reflective of the people we’re looking to have in our program,” said Davis who led the charge to change the name in the 1990s. “We’re not excluding anyone but it’s an opportunity for us to showcase the arts from the Black life perspective.”

That multidisciplinary approach and emphasis on Black culture has stayed consistent across nine Florida governors, five Miami-Dade County Mayors and an endless stream of commissioners. Over the last 40 years, Davis has built the AHCAC into the premiere talent incubator for Miami’s young, Black artists. The long list of prominent program alumni – from 2017 Academy Award-winner [Tarell Alvin McCraney](#) to acclaimed dancer Bianca Brewton to former Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater artistic director Robert Battle – proves that Davis and his staff know what they’re doing. But what’s more impressive is *how* they’ve cultivated such success.

“Everything I learned in the program prepared me for where I am now,” jazz pianist and AHCAC alum William Deslafort said in a soon-to-be released documentary entitled “African Heritage Cultural Arts Center: A Model for the Nation.”

Over his 40-year tenure, Davis has overseen curriculum improvements like the creation of the center’s after school programs, Kuumba winter and spring workshops and the nine-week intensive Summer Arts Conservatory. He has also been behind several structural improvements including the construction of the art gallery, a music hall with practice studios and renovations to the Black box theater. The combination of state-of-the-art facilities with Davis’ vision and exceptional teachers like dance manager Eulyce Eason has created a rigorous program that treats them like artists the minute they step onto campus.

“We provide possibilities for all of the disciplines,” said Eason who taught Battle during his time at AHCAC. The Black child who might get teased for liking opera or dance gets embraced by instructors because “we already have the format on how artists are supposed to be nurtured.”

“The Cultural Arts Center is a beacon of light and information so that if you come through those doors,” Eason added, “you’ll find yourself.”

Unapologetic Blackness is the fuel that ignites Davis’ fire. It has done so for 40 years and, as a result, the AHCAC has impacted generations of Black children who graduate the facility with a sense of pride in not only themselves but their ancestors – a fact of even greater importance as [Black history continues to be stripped from schools](#).

“He created the environment, the ecosystem that immersed all who walked into that center into African culture and heritage and what it means to be Black,” former Opa-locka Mayor Matthew Pigatt said of Davis. Pigatt attended the center in middle school and later returned to teach Black history courses there. “Growing up in public schools in South Florida, you don’t get to see so much of culture and heritage of us.”

‘HE MEANS A LOT TO ME’

Born in Overtown but raised in Liberty City, Davis was a naturally gifted drawer who graduated from Miami Northwestern High School. While at Miami-Dade College studying art, Davis had a rude awakening.

“I got there and I was not ready” to be an art major, Davis recalled. “I had no concepts of design, colors, painting techniques – nothing. Just give me a pencil and I guarantee I’d be first in that class.”

Davis would eventually change his major to theater and graduate with a BFA from Florida Atlantic University, but that experience always stuck with him. He had the talent. He had the imagination. He had the drive. What else could he be missing?

It would take Davis years to finally understand that the lack of exposure to the fundamentals of art put him at a serious disadvantage.

“I went through elementary school, middle school, high school – none of my teachers sat down and taught me the fundamentals and different techniques,” Davis said. “They’d say ‘Marshall, you can draw. Just go in that corner, don’t sit around these other knuckleheads and keep drawing.’ And that’s what I did.”

So the dream of Davis, the cartoonist, was buried – albeit temporarily. Another dream, however, had sparked: while on college break, Davis had seen plans for the cultural center before its 1975 opening and essentially prophesied his current role. He’d eventually get his chance but not before a teaching gig at Rainbow Park Elementary and recruiting jobs at both Miami Dade College and Florida International University after graduation. Then, in 1983, came the call.

Now, just days before the 40th anniversary of Davis' Dec. 18th start date, AHCAC held a ceremony for the Instrumental Start Fellows, a group of students who were gifted musical instruments and lessons. Victoria Ladoceur, an 11-year-old fifth grader, was one of those students. She flashed a grin as she scampered on stage to collect her new tenor saxophone from the man she called "amazing."

"He's not just one of those bosses who sits around in his office and does whatever," Ladoceur said of Davis. "He means a lot to me, he walks around the places, says hi to kids, talks to the students. That's really nice."



Marshall Davis Sr., director of the African Heritage Cultural Arts Center in Liberty City, helps the 5-year-old class line up for a recorder performance. Jennifer King

The Instrumental Start Fellows, which developed after a \$75,000 donation to the center, are just the latest endeavor that Davis will undertake as the AHCAC nears its 50th year. Davis wants to expand – “If we could do it here in Liberty City, which at one time was considered the third largest impoverished area in a major city, there’s no excuse that this facility shouldn’t be constructed and systemized in other places,” he said – across the country or even the world.

“My concept was not just get kids off the street but they’re also on the road to success,” Davis added. “I wanted to make them comfortable. To make them competent. To make them confident. “

Added Davis: “If they want to go professional, they’ll have the professional foundation and the skills they need. We treat them with the qualities and the benchmarks for a professional production.”

Of course not all who come through the AHCAC go onto to be artists. Pigatt, for example, went the education and public servant route yet even he credits Davis and AHCAC for his cultural foundation.

“Mr. Davis, in the core and heart of our community Liberty City, has taken the youth and exposed them to who they are as a people and introduced them to arts, to dance and that has inspired and touched the lives of generations of youth here in Black Miami,” Pigatt said. “He’s a cultural icon.”

Because now more than ever, places like the Center are needed.

“The role of the culture center is to see that we’re telling our own stories,” Davis said. “That’s history. You have to be truthful.”



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