

MUSEUMS

His story

At the Perry Mansion Cultural Center, Sam Smith wants to reshape the narrative of black life in America—by reconstructing a slave ship in his basement.

By TYRA NICOLE TRICHE

When Sam Smith opened the Perry Mansion Cultural Center in 2010, his preeminent goal was to reclaim and reshape the narrative of black life in America. “You build bridges by having the ability to control your image and your story, and [black people] don’t get to do that,” Smith says. And with each exhibit, he’s been able to tell this story piece by piece, but its culmination will come in a few years when he’s completed building a slave ship in the basement for an exhibit that will be called “The Slave Experience.”

The Queen Anne-style house that is the Perry Mansion Cultural Center is located at 7042 S. Perry, in Englewood. When Smith first purchased the home, it was a dilapidated drug hub in a crime-ridden neighborhood. Smith, who was born in Mississippi but raised in Chicago, was confident that the neighborhood had more to offer than drugs, delinquency, and death. The Perry Mansion Cultural Center was his way of proving and showcasing that.

“It’s been very good for this block,” Smith says. “When I first bought this place there were heroin addicts nodding off in the middle of the street, the block was full of young people selling drugs and hanging out. You don’t get any of that now, and it’s because they have respect for the space.”

Since its inception, the cultural center has hosted museumlike art exhibits, open-mike nights, after-school programs, and more. And although it may be coincidental, Englewood has seen a decrease in crime since the Perry Mansion Cultural Center opened its doors.

Smith says that community members have told him how much they love the cultural cen-

ter and what it has done for the neighborhood. He says that he’s built relationships with some of the young people who were causing trouble when he first moved in. “I’ve had conversations with them about the importance of the space,” he says. “I’ve even sent three of the young people who used to hang out on this block to Job Corps.”

It’s been two years since the cultural center’s last exhibit, titled “Tortured Souls.” That exhibit focused on the transatlantic slave trade and introduced the model of the ship that will be built for “The Slave Experience.” The ship will be made of wood and will encompass the entire 2,200-square-foot basement. There will be wax figures of slaves lying on the floor of the hold, and the basement itself will be vacuum sealed.

His intent is to give visitors “a real-life example of what it was like to be transported on the ships,” Smith explains. “You will experience all the sounds and the smells of what it would be like on the middle decks of the ship. It won’t be a pleasant experience.”

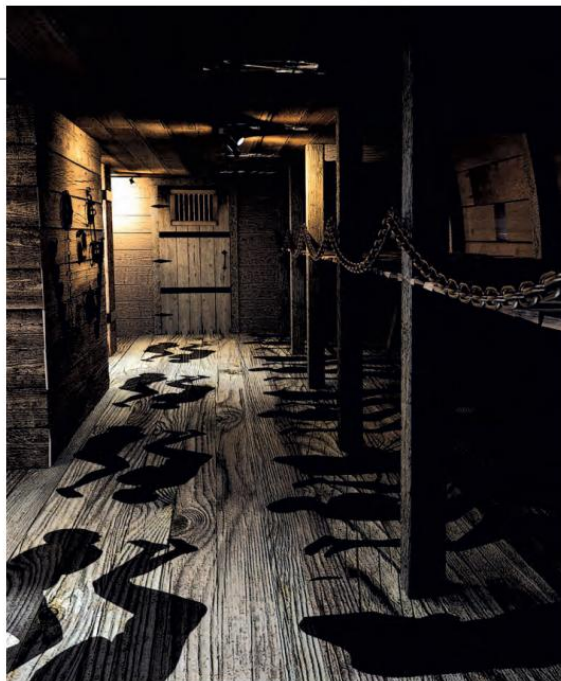
PERRY MANSION CULTURAL CENTER
Mon-Fri 9 AM-5 PM, 7042 S. Perry,
773-494-9526, perrymansion.org **FREE**

Along with the ship, the rest of the house will be turned into a “Slave Experience” exhibit. The attic will serve as a ballroom and documentary screening room. The first and second floors will feature art from artists across the globe, all inspired by the Middle Passage. There will be panel discussions where the featured artists are given the opportunity to discuss their work. Then experts will join them and provide the facts of what transpired during the ordeal.

Smith is planning this exhibit himself, as he usually does, but since the ship will be so large he will be getting assistance with construction. After the exhibit, the ship will remain as a permanent fixture at the cultural center.

Building this slave ship is something that Smith says he has been thinking about for nine years now. By his estimate, “The Slave Experience” exhibit will be a \$1.2 million project. Fund-raising efforts for this particular venture are in beginning stages and set to launch in September. Once the money is raised, the ship will take two to three years to build.

In the meantime, Smith is currently working on a dual exhibit that’s set to be completed by



A model of “The Slave Experience” (above) and the Perry Mansion Cultural Center garden. © COURTESY SAM SMITH

next year. One level will be an exhibit on the Flint water crisis and other cities across the country that have even higher levels of lead in their water. The other level will be an exhibit on the nation of Mauritania, where, although slavery was abolished in 1981, 20 percent of the population is still enslaved. (He is considering, though, changing the Mauritania exhibit to one on black wealth instead.)

While it has been rewarding, running the cultural center alone has been taxing for Smith, who is also a master carpenter and furniture maker. “I have to work every day to make a living; I do this in my spare time. After I work all day and I go to the gym, I come back here and I build either early in the morning or very late at night,” he says. “Time is very challenging and, of course, [lack of] resources are challenging.”

The cultural center is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt

nonprofit that operates solely through donations, without any grant funding. Smith started a GoFundMe about a year and a half ago to raise money for basic upkeep and costs associated with upcoming exhibits, but it hasn’t been very successful.

“It’s a constant battle,” Smith says of his work maintaining the cultural center. “It’s such a great demand on me personally,” but “I’m not finished with what my original goal was with this space.” While he does plan on passing on the responsibility of operating the Perry Mansion Cultural Center to a successor, Smith must first finish “The Slave Experience” exhibit. His original goal was to “direct our story and tell our story from our perspective. And that will be done when the slave-ship piece is completed.”

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