

Cover story

Omaha woman never forgot legacy of malcolm X

By Ken Fuson
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Omaha, NE. - Rowena Moore can rest now, America has rediscovered Malcolm X. Rap groups dedicate songs to him. A movie is planned based on his life. His books are hot sellers, Teen-agers wear buttons and T-shirts bearing his likeness. Twenty-five years after he was killed, headlines trumpet his new popularity: "The Rebirth of Malcolm X" - The Los Angeles Times. "The Resurrection of Malcolm X" - The Washington Post.

Never Forgot

Rowena Moore never forgot. For 20 years she waged an often lonely and rarely appreciated campaign to remind Omaha that an important and controversial black leader was born in the city. Thanks to her efforts, the African American Progressive Action Network and the National Malcolm X Commemoration Commission will bring hundreds, and possibly thousands, of people to Omaha in May to celebrate the 65th anniversary of Malcolm X's birth.

At 79, Moore could bask in the glory of a job well done. "I'm not done yet," she protests.

She owns the land where Malcolm X's boyhood home once stood, but it's not enough.

She bought another 10 acres surrounding the site, but she wants even more.

Historical Marker

She persuaded the State of Nebraska to erect a 5-foot-tall historical marker on the land, "but I'm still not satisfied."

Moore stands in the small park that surrounds the blue, cast aluminum marker and extends her arm. The land she points to is full of trees, brush and debris. People dump trash there.

But on this same land Moore envisions the Malcolm X Birthsite International Center. She sees a park, a museum and a library. She sees people 'sitting in an outdoor amphitheater. She sees children arriving to study the writings and teachings of a man who urged black Americans to demand their rights.

Those children, she hopes, will discover the Malcolm X that she remembers - a man who evolved from a street-hustling, dope-dealing pimp to a self-educated prison inmate to a Black Muslim convert who exchanged his surname of Little for an "X" and delivered scorching speeches that referred to whites as "blue-eyed devils."

Those children will learn how Malcolm X split from Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, traveled to Mecca, converted to orthodox Islam, changed his name to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and changed his beliefs.

"In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of All white people," he wrote. "I **never will** be guilty of that again - and I know now that some white people Are truly sincere that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man.*' The true Islam has shown me that a blanket indictment of all white people is wrong as when whites make blanket indictments against blacks.

"Yes, I have been convinced that some American whites do want to help cure the rampant racism which is on the path to destroying this country!"

Rowena Moore sees all this amid the trees, the bush and trash.

All she needs to make her dream a reality is \$7 million.

"I think it will be built," says George Garrison, chairman of the black studies department at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. "I just hope it will be built in her lifetime."

Don't bet against her. A handsome women who looks 20 years younger than 79, Moore has surprised people before with her iron determination.

In the 1940s, she threatened to organize a picket of the Armour meat-packing plant in Omaha unless the company opened its doors to black women. She and some 400 other women were hired. Moore worked there 20 years.

Then, in the 1970s, bank officials approached her with an offer to buy the land where Malcolm X's boyhood home stood. They offered \$9,000 for six lots.

Moore needed the money.

She turned them down.

"Back in the early days people used to say that black people don't do the things for themselves that need to be done," she says. 'I heard that expression." I felt we needed something of our own, something that would honor an important man in our history.

"I knew if we sold the ground, we would never get it back. While we had it, I thought I'd struggle along and try to keep it, because I thought that the time would come when we would be able to do something that the city of Omaha, and especially black people, can be proud of. And that's what I want to do."

Another Reason

There's another reason Moore held firm to the land, a connection between herself and Malcolm X she wanted to keep.

Moore remembers when she first saw Malcolm X on television. She was intrigued by all the cameras and microphones surrounding the lean black man. But she was mesmerized by his voice, the same way Franklin Roosevelt's voice had drawn her to the radio when she was younger. She listened to Malcolm X every chance she had.

"In those days there weren't many black people that were standing up for their rights, and they did not speak out, but Malcolm spoke out."

"He was saying things that white people weren't accustomed to hearing and they really didn't know how to take it. He was saying that if the white man hits you, you try not to let him hit nobody else." Wasn't that what her mother and father had always taught her - to stand up for herself?

But Malcolm X was branded a racist, a hate-monger, an advocate of violence against whites. Historians say white America's fear of Malcolm X made people more receptive to the non-violence advocated by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"I wholly agree with him and fully agree with Malcolm on teaching people to stand up for their rights," Moore says.. "But I was so glad that he saw fit to go to Mecca and realize that there are some good white people in the world."

"I appreciate the change that he made. I tell people that I am working with the last days of his life."

"Malcolm X was assassinated Feb. 21, 1965, in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. Three men with ties to the Nation of Islam were convicted of the murder.

Five years after the death, Moore received a telephone call from her sister. What was the address of their father's old home in Omaha, she wanted to know, the place that the city condemned and had to be torn down?

"3448 Pinkney St." Moore replied. Imagine that her sister replied. She was reading a book about Malcolm X that said his family lived at 3448 Pinkney St. when he was born.

Native Son

It was true. And it was then that Moore, who owned the land and five empty lots nearby, decided that Omaha should honor its native son.

She formed and still heads the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation. Each year, the group's members - there are about 150 now - held meetings or rallies on the anniversaries of Malcolm X's birth and death.

"She just winds up being part of history no matter what she does," says Rick Cross, a foundation board member. "She's almost like a 79-year-old General Patton. She knows what she wants done and she'll do whatever it takes to get it done."

With Moore in the lead tank, the foundation had the land placed on the National Register of Historical Places. The state posted the historical marker in 1987.

County Foreclosed

That was the year the county foreclosed on 10 acres surrounding the site. Moore waited the necessary two years, then paid about \$11,000 for the land.

Attallah Shabazz, Malcolm X's eldest daughter and the Omaha foundation's national president, raised about \$6,000. An Omaha man donated \$3,000. Moore paid for the rest, dipping into an account she had started for her six grandchildren.

"I prayed and prayed for that land," she says. "I mean, I really prayed. It was almost like a miracle that I was able to do it."

If raising \$11,000 was a miracle, what will \$7 million represent? Moore says that's how much it will take to build the Malcolm X Birthsite International Center.

Coordinating Event

"Were actively **discussing**' the ways and means of supporting those very courageous projects that she has undertaken," says Ron Daniels of Youngstown, Ohio, an official with the African-American Progressive Network who is coordinating the May eve'nt in Omaha.

Daniels says - and Moore hopes - that the resurgence of interest in Malcolm X could lead more people to contribute to the Omaha center.

Especially among young blacks, the popularity of Malcolm X can be seen in everything from references to him in rap songs to the quote from him at the end of the movie, "Do the Right Thing."

"Young people in particular find in Malcom's voice a champion of the oppressed, a champion of the down-trodden," Daniels says. "I think they're attracted to his ideas about **racial solidarity and black pride.**"

"That would put them in lockstep with a 79-year-old women in Omaha who says she won't rest," because if I don't do it, it won't get done."

"I tell people I'm not building this center for me," She says. "I'm almost 80 years old and I probably will never get the opportunity to enjoy it. But I'm leaving some footprints in the sands of time, and somebody will know that some old black woman named Rowena Moore started this.

"They may not go to the trouble to learn anything more about me, but at least that building will be there. They'll know I was here."