



HAAC BRINGS AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY IN HAVERSTRAW TO LIFE PART 1

BY: Keith S. Shikowitz, Editor in Chief/investigative Reporter



The African American community has been a part of the Town of Haverstraw since its founding in 1616. The Haverstraw African American Connection (HAAC) has been teaching about African American History in Haverstraw for the past 20 years.

Virginia Norfleet started the HAAC after she purchased a property on 39 Clinton Street, formerly known as the Watkins House in 2005. "I did a full demolition because I was going to build my mom a home. Within the demolition, we had a very, interesting mishap where, one of the foundation walls, needed reinforcement. I called in for the concrete trucks to come, and they were pouring concrete and one of my guys was standing there directing them back, and then the earth gave way. So, he went into the hole. We stopped the concrete trucks, sent a backhoe down to pick them up, and in the pile was a brick with a cross on it."

Having been born and raised in Haverstraw, she's 3rd generation, and it means nothing to have bricks because we have them everywhere. It's still the brick capital of the world, Haverstraw is. But this brick was very unusual because it had a cross on it.

<https://youtu.be/R4PcPJ772uQ>

Norfleet added that it was the labor of the brickyards. That's the brickyards were basically African American. "Anyway, with that told, we did a lot more research and we got a lot more facts and we got artifacts and we found shackles and we got things to prove that everything happened right here and I went to my childhood friends and said we need to do something and we formed a group called the Haverstraw African-American Connection, which our mission is to tell. The story of the African American that's never been told in Rockland County. Although we arrived here 400 years plus ago, the story came out basically in 2016 at its best. That's when I opened the park to dedicate the park to the story of the people of, the African diaspora, which includes, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, wherever we're from, the whole diaspora, because it was stops that went along the line, so it's all inclusive. That's, that's the story of HAC, the beginning of it."

They started out with the group, then they got the park done.



According to Norfleet, it's very successful, and they've had multiple statues come in there from world-renowned sculptures like Wesley Wilfrid who did, the Journey to Freedom, the first Harriet Tubman statue which got about 300,000 viewers that came from all over online and in person, and with that noted, our governor realized that there was value in, backing the story of Haverstraw and becoming a part of it. She gave money to purchase a permanent statue which is called the Beacon of Hope, which belongs to HAAC and it's in the park for all to see.



"We started with that, then the next thing we did was, I started working with, the, Holocaust Museum. A very interesting thing was happening. Oh, I moved to, Georgia and came back and built this house for my mother, so that took half of my life. I was visiting the Holocaust Museum, but I noticed people in town talking about Jewish people as those people. It was that they and those are them and us, and I would tell people that's funny. That's what I used to hear in the 60s when you were talking about me. I talked to the director of the Holocaust Museum and I said, we should do something together because we have to stand back-to-back."



“Civil rights, that's what we saw, after the Holocaust, whenever these, two communities come together. There's a strength. In Haverstraw there was a big, you know, we have the first synagogue here in Haverstraw. Jewish people have always been part of us and vice versa. We're birthed out of Judaism by way of Christianity, which is where I grew up in, in the Baptist faith. It just made sense.”

They started doing the Better Together, program, and now to date they're up to teaching 60,000 kids in schools, in Rockland County, Bergen County, Westchester County, Orange County. We're all over the place, so that piece took off.

<https://youtu.be/4RtDgOuhO84>

Then she got a call from a principal in North Rockland. She was the middle, well, she was actually principal of Farley Elementary School, Ava Shelby, and she was telling her of a problem they were having. The kids, some of the kids were cutting school, and then she would come down and try to find the kids, and all kinds of things were happening, and the kids were getting in trouble like after the Haverstraw Trust Center closed.

“They closed at 6, 6:30, and then these kids would be on the streets until 9 just getting in trouble. I said, Avis, you know, I'm going to try to see if I can get something that can take the kids in after school or the kids that have been thrown out of the center for whatever reasons, and we created this building that you're sitting in, which is the after-school enrichment program, and basically we're taking in kids. We take everybody in, but we love having the kids that we can watch at our home by themselves or are looking for a place to go with, that's constructive and can teach and have fun while doing it.”

This place means that the parents don't have to worry about them being on the street being pulled into something. They've been here over 2 years now, very successful. These, these kids get exposed to everything.

What is everything? What are some of the things they offer here? Cooking, financing, the kids formed a choir, and Ginny mentioned this because that's one of the biggest things that they do. They get involved with community give backs. They help the senior citizens.

<https://youtu.be/2uwTJnxkGj0>

Ginny says that choir has been to many of the churches and temples here in Rockland and elsewhere. People love them and they're very excited to be part of a history of a people that was forgotten and now we're in the forefront for the things that we do and the things that we have going on. What else are they doing with the Jewish community besides the stuff at the Holocaust museum?

“We do, Yom Hoshuah at the courthouse. Then after that, after we do the remembrance of, Yom Hoshuah, the, Kids, then, they give out and light the candles for the Holocaust survivors. They know the survivors that they're taking the candles from and they leave them in the park for 30 days. When people come to the park and say, what is this, they get to explain what the Holocaust was and why we're such a part of it, we do a lot with the Holocaust Museum. If you were to go there now, within the Holocaust Museum is another museum called the Brick Speaks, and it's the story of the African Americans. You get 22 stories, at one time, and then the, in the atrium in the hallway, you'll see all the pictures of better together and all the school kids and all the things that we do together.”

“That's the kind of stuff we do, and they call us for whatever. The kids go into the museum, we do, movie nights. One of the movies we did was Shared Legacies right now we're doing Sarah's Oil, which talks about, shared legacies with Martin Luther King and a Rabbi, how they got together, and this week, yesterday, as a matter of fact, we were in Nanuet and we were teaching the kids about another rabbi and Martin Luther King and Mahalia Jackson and how at his, I have a Dream speech. We teach how we work together collectively and it, and how it changes the world and it's almost mandatory that these two groups stay together because separate we can accomplish some things, but together we change the world. I've noticed where you have an African American community, a lot of times right next to it you'll have a Jewish community in Crown Heights, it's the same thing.”

“You can also find these communities being neighbors in Spring Valley, Haverstraw. It just seems that my people and your people seem to gravitate to each other. We know that we have to support each other because nobody else will. One of the things that I teach, people use the word antisemitism and people use the word racism. It breaks it down, so it's less offensive. If somebody says, oh, they're anti-Semitic, they think that's supposed to be OK for me. Hate is hate. Whichever ‘-ism’ you're on, what I always tell Jewish people, if they hate me, they hate you more. You can almost bet that because a lot of times people feel like African Americans with the support of the Jewish rabbis and things, that's where the NAACP's birthed, that's where a lot of things come from.