

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - Suzanne Burks on Phillis Wheatley center
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CATHY WURZER: You're on Minnesota now. We love Minnesota history so much, we do a monthly segment we call Minnesota Now and Then. Here's a story that occurred on this date nearly 100 years ago today, October 17, 1924.

That's when a new community center opened in North Minneapolis. It was named after Phillis Wheatley. She was one of the best-known poets of the 18th century and the first African American author to publish a book of poetry.

The Phillis Wheatley settlement house was a center that offered training and housing for Minneapolis's Black community. The center still stands. And Suzanne Burks is the executive director nowadays. She joins us right now. Thank you for being on the program, Suzanne.

SUZANNE Thank you so much for having me.

BURKS:

CATHY This was originally called the Phillis Wheatley settlement house, as I mentioned. And in the day, settlement
WURZER: houses were places for immigrants to get support. Same concept, although, as I understand, for black women. Is that right?

SUZANNE Yeah, it was black women, but also just black people, especially for those that came here in Minnesota in
BURKS: particular because they couldn't stay anywhere downtown or any other hotels or any other places. So they went to Phillis Wheatley settlement house.

CATHY Now, we should tell folks this was the Jim crow era. Minneapolis was primarily a white city. So dig a little bit
WURZER: deeper here. What needs did it fulfill for Black folks?

SUZANNE So thank you for asking that. So a lot of times what happened is a lot of people that came to Minnesota, they
BURKS: were either Pullman porters that came up on the railroad or people that were very famous, like Paul Robeson, a number of people like that. Again they couldn't stay at any other place, so they stayed at Phillis Wheatley settlement house.

What it did, though, it was actually started by the Women Christian Association. And part of what they try to do back in the day was to ensure that especially women were able to do a lot around training. And then also, the other thing that it was really helpful for people that were coming up here is to help them understand the culture so that they could understand how to really survive in a very different environment for which most of them came from.

And I was saying to someone that I spoke to on your staff, Britt, that my grandfather was actually a poor man poet. And he came up from Ohio. And it was one of those things where it was important for people to understand the culture here in the twin cities, specifically in Minnesota and in Minneapolis.

And so what they normally did was with the Women Christian Association, they really tried to help with women. What are the things that they needed to learn about the culture? They trained women about how to become administrative assistants or secretaries back in the day.

And then they also did a lot of things around, again, the cultural pieces. So they provided a safe place for people to be to enjoy their own culture. So they had things like dances. And they had plays. And they had things for the young people to do in terms of sports and activities, sewing classes, and also secretarial kinds of things, as I mentioned. So a lot of that was around just making sure people understood how to survive here in a very different culture than which they came.

CATHY Wasn't the NAACP, the Minnesota NAACP, organized there? Am I right about that?

WURZER:

SUZANNE Not here in Minnesota, no. No. No, no, no. No, not originally, no. No. Not here in Minnesota. It was in actually
BURKS: Baltimore, by the way, Baltimore, just to be specific.

CATHY Sorry about that.

WURZER:

SUZANNE No problem.

BURKS:

CATHY Fast forward to 2020 here. I remember covering this. Your center announced it had received a pretty big grant
WURZER: from Microsoft for a digital training program. So you obviously have evolved the services.

SUZANNE Yeah. So as I mentioned, it went from a settlement house, and it has evolved over the years. And a lot of it is
BURKS: based on what the needs are in the community.

And so what the board had decided in 2020-- that's when I came aboard-- was to really put a stake in the ground around digital literacy. And one of the things that we found out was is that in the state of Minnesota, only 4% of people that are in technology positions were people of color, or BIPOC is the new term is, if you will.

And so what we decided to do-- the board decided and supported it-- is that we would start a digital tech works academy. And then the focus would be on helping people with basic technology skills and then also Microsoft certifications.

So we received a \$300,000 grant from Microsoft over, again, it was \$300,000, basically \$100,000 each year over three years. We were one of 50 organizations across the country out of 1,500 that received that grant. And so that's where, like I said, we decided to really put our stake in the ground and focused on that area.

CATHY So what do you think is next for the Phillis Wheatley Community Center? Where do you want to see it in-- well,
WURZER: what, now two years at its 100th birthday party?

SUZANNE Oh, that is so exciting. So there's so many things that we're doing. One is we're restoring our camp. And it's
BURKS: being led by our chairperson over the camp, Laura Danielson, who just retired from Fredrikson & Byron. But she has dedicated now her time to help us with restoring the camp. So we're in the process of doing that.

The camp was donated to us by Katherine Parsons in 1955. And we have now been in the process of trying to do that. So it's about a \$6.5 million renovation, a restoration project that we have. We're hoping to get about \$4 million from the state. As you can imagine, I just heard your interviewer, you were talking about what's going on with the state legislature and a lot of other things. So we're hoping we get some of that equity bonding that we submitted for.

The other thing that we're trying to do is really make sure that we're staying in lockstep with what's needed in the community. So we're also looking at probably building a new building within the next couple of years.

CATHY WURZER: And when it comes to being relevant to the community, how will you maybe change to meet the needs of a growing community?

SUZANNE BURKS: Well, that's a great question. And so actually, one of the things we're doing, we're having a session this Thursday, and part of it's regarding the camp. And so we're bringing people like Harry Davis Jr., Jeff Hayden, and a number of other people who either went to the camp, their parent went to the camp, their families went to the camp, and we're asking them to give us one-- we want to have oral histories because we think this is important for the community to understand that.

But in the in the process of doing that, we're also asking them to say, what are the things that you all need in the community? We can guess all we want to. But the bottom line is we've got to ask the community for what is it that they really need.

We believe, again, digital literacy is a major component because as I was mentioning, with Microsoft certifications, individuals can get a job with the right kind of certification. They can make \$65,000 a year. They don't have to go four-year college or anything else. They can just get a really good certification and make that kind of money.

Part of it is to really ensure that people understand that. So we've been working with DEED-- the commissioner and so forth at DEED-- to ensure that we get the word out regarding this.

CATHY WURZER: Sounds like you have an exciting future ahead of you here. Suzanne, thank you. By the way, happy birthday to Phillis Wheatley.

SUZANNE BURKS: Thank you so much. I appreciate it. I really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

CATHY WURZER: Talk to you. Thank you. Suzanne Burks is executive director of the Phillis Wheatley Community Center in North Minneapolis. It was on this very date, October 17, 1924, that the center opened. So we're celebrating that. You can visit the center online at philliswheatley.org.