

LOCAL

National Civil Rights Museum expands with new 'Legacy Experience'



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A curious thing happened during the ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the opening of the [National Civil Rights Museum](#)'s new "Legacy Experience."

The event in the plaza near the balcony where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was killed had proceeded as expected — food trucks, deejays, inspirational remarks from a podium — when Memphis Mayor Paul Young took the microphone.

"No matter what gets thrown at us, we're going to continue to rise," Young said. "Even if they try to take away our congressional representation —"

His microphone went dead.

As soon as his comments moved from generic rally-the-troops uplift to a specific critique of the Tennessee legislature's recent vote to [divide majority-Black Memphis into three districts](#), to reduce the city's voting strength, he was silenced.

The culprit was momentarily faulty technology, not a conspirator or saboteur. Yet the moment seemed emblematic of the challenges facing civil and human rights advocates at a time when courts and government leaders are regulating

speech about race, eliminating diversity efforts, weakening the Voting Rights Act and [removing such books as “Roots” from schools](#).

Such challenges help explain the motivation for the “Legacy Experience,” which opened to the public May 16 after several years of planning and development.

“The Legacy Experience is not just a renovation,” said Dr. Russ Wigginton, museum president. “It is a reckoning. We built it for this exact American moment.”

For many people, the term “museum” suggests a place devoted to the past: a repository for the display of artifacts associated with extinct species, vanished civilizations and dead artists.

But the “Legacy Experience” — a multimillion-dollar, multistory installation that may represent the institution’s most significant expansion since [its founding in 1991](#) — points toward the future as much as it reflects on the past.

Taking a cue from the progressive activist message of [Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s](#) final book, “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?,” its three stories of galleries and interactive space are intended not just to educate but to inspire action.

NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MUSEUM: [Marc Morial, Velma Lois Jones and Mark Suzman honored at 2025 Freedom Award ceremony in Memphis](#)

Expanding on this idea in conversation, Wigginton alluded to the accumulating tensions of recent years: The ICE arrests of immigrants; the government rejection of diversity programs; the legislative actions that seem destined to dilute Black representation in Congress; and the resistance to these efforts.

“The timing of this renovation comes at a powerful moment where more people are engaged for multiple reasons than probably at any time in the last 50 years,” Wigginton said.

In this context, "It's our responsibility to help young people connect with civil and human rights issues in a way that matters," he said. "We are fundamentally trying to help young people find their voice and find their connection to civil and human rights issues for today and tomorrow."

The "Legacy Experience" completes a \$38 million project that includes the adjacent [BlueCross Healthy Place at Founders Park](#), which opened in October. Self+Tucker Architects of Memphis handled the overall design, with Washington-based Howard+Revis Design overseeing the exhibition space.

A compact public plaza, Founders Park connects Main Street to Mulberry, the street fronted by the National Civil Rights Museum. Preserving and incorporating part of the Lorraine Motel, where King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, the museum opened in 1991.

The Legacy Experience, meanwhile, occupies an extensively renovated 120-year-old South Main Street structure that once included the boarding house where King's convicted assassin, James Earl Ray, was a resident when King was murdered.

Acquired by the museum and converted into a too-often overlooked annex to the main campus in 2002, the so-called Legacy Building was primarily a grim showplace for the preserved bathtub where Ray is said to have stood when he shot King, from his second-story perch in Bessie Brewer's Rooming House.

MEMPHIS HISTORY: [How Memphis soul music helped shape the Civil Rights Movement](#)

Although the assassination is examined in-depth in new exhibits, the building's top-to-bottom makeover primarily gives the museum a chance to pick up the civil rights story after the tragic disruption of the assassination. As a result, the new "Experience" celebrates the power of community activism by examining such post-1968 movements as the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment, ACT UP, Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter.

Dr. Hasan Jeffries, professor of history at Ohio State University, served as a lead scholar in development of the exhibits, working alongside such key museum personnel as Ryan Jones, Director of History, Interpretation, and Curatorial Services, and Erica Harper, Director of Collections & Exhibitions.

Wigginton cited the “Say Their Names” exhibit as particularly powerful. With a special focus on 17-year-old Larry Payne, who was shot after participating in a Memphis sanitation workers march, the exhibit is a reminder of “the number of Black people since 1968 who have been violently killed through some form of police brutality. ‘Say Their Names.’ It’s a lot of them.”

The Legacy Experience also includes classrooms, changing galleries and a "Freedom Award" gallery, where visitors can learn about the recipients of the [museum's signature annual award](#) (the roll call includes Oprah, Bono, the Dalai Lama and [Michelle Obama](#), to name a few).

With his 4-year-old son, Ezra, on his shoulders, design architect Mario Walker of Self+Tucker said the "Experience" was constructed with a hopeful message embedded within its somewhat grim content. As visitors move through the galleries, they move from darker to lighter spaces, ultimately emerging in the fresh air of the outdoor space that overlooks the main museum.

Walker said he had brought his children to the ribbon-cutting ceremony — Marea, 8, and Jude, 11, were also in attendance — because the event was an example of the type of positive community gathering celebrated inside the building. "I like to get them out in public and experience civic action," he said.

Organizers noted that the opening of the renovated Legacy Building occurred in a significant year: 2026 marks not just the 35th anniversary of the civil rights museum but the 250th anniversary of America. Some speakers suggested the birthday party for the U.S.A. will be subdued, at best.

"These times are dark, y'all," said Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, the founder of the Center for Journalism and Democracy at Howard University, who contributed some artifacts to the Legacy Experience. "These are the darkest days of my lifetime.

"They erase our history because they want to erase our rights," she said. "That's why they come for voting first. You can have no other rights without the ability to select your representation....

"But we do not come from a defeated people... I refused to be the generation that loses the rights that our parents and our grandparents and our great-grandparents fought for."

Said Mayor Young, after a stage tech provided him with a working microphone: "We're gonna find a path to flip three congressional seats, if we got to."