

National Civil Rights Museum to open balcony where Martin Luther King Jr. was shot

By Linda A. Moore

Originally published 12:00 a.m., June 23, 2012

Updated 12:47 p.m., June 23, 2012

Starting in November, visitors to the National Civil Rights Museum will be able to do what others haven't been allowed -- stand on the balcony where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

The main building of the museum, which opened in 1991, is undergoing major renovations and will be closed beginning in November until the first quarter of 2014.

During that time, visitors will be allowed on the balcony to view Room 306, where King stayed.

"We get 200,000 people a year who come to see the room," said Beverly Robertson, museum president.

The museum does not want to deny people that opportunity so while it is inaccessible from the inside during the renovation, it will be viewed from the outside by way of the balcony.

The plan is to construct a tunnel with photographs and information that puts into context through key points in the civil rights movement leading up to King's final visit to Memphis.

That tunnel will lead to the steps of the balcony.

"One thing that is important to us, that is sacred space or as (Nelson) Mandela said, 'holy ground,' " Robertson said.

A museum staff member will be there to make sure the space is appreciated, she said.

"We need to make sure there is great respect for this space," she said. "Because that is the whole power of that space, that balcony and that room where Dr. King spent the last minutes of his life."

Museum founder, retired judge D'Army Bailey, believes opening the balcony is an "excellent idea."

"I always felt the balcony should be shared with the public," Bailey said. "That's an

experience that is rare anywhere in the world."

Said Robertson, "It's really a once in a lifetime experience. And a wonderful one."

-- Linda A. Moore: (901) 529-2702



© 2012 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online