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African-American museum came first, risk second

Detroit's elite put their very names on the line

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BY FRANK PROVENZANO AND ROCHELLE RILEY
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

The cadre of Detroit's elite who met March 27 and April 6 in Judge Damon Keith's chambers put their reputations and pocketbooks on the line. The goal: save the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, which is running out of cash, time and credibility.

For the prominent executives, it meant attaching their names to a museum that has been failing for years.

For Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, it meant focusing on one need when there are so many -- increasing economic development, reducing crime and fixing the schools.

For Keith, a 6th Circuit Court of Appeals judge, it meant walking an ethical high wire.

Keith, 81, is a legend and mentor to a Who's Who in Michigan law and politics, including Gov. Jennifer Granholm, a former law clerk whom Keith swore into office. The Code of Conduct for U.S. Judges forbids soliciting funds for educational, civic and charitable organizations as well as using the prestige of the judicial office for that purpose.

He said he served as a catalyst for bringing together the high-power group in his chambers, but did not solicit money.

Keith said he couldn't stand by and watch the museum fail.

"I said we have to save this museum," he said. "Now, we have to hope that the community will now rise up.

"We blacks who are in positions of power and authority who don't use our positions to help the struggle of black people are prostitutes and aren't worthy of being in our position," he said. "We have an obligation to save this museum."

About \$1 million was pledged to pay the museum's current bills and ensure that it will remain open with three months left in its fiscal year. Six of those at Tuesday's meeting wrote \$100,000 checks, Keith said.

The museum had asked the city for \$1 million in emergency aid. With the private donations, that pending appeal before the Detroit City Council might be unnecessary.



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"Coming up with the money for the museum is not the end, but just the start," said Sharon Madison Polk, owner of Madison, Madison International engineering and architectural firm, who was at both meetings.

The group also made a five-year financial commitment to help the museum become less reliant on city money. She'll make an announcement May 3 that spells out plans to build membership, endowment and annual giving.

Among those at the meetings were former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer; Melvin Butch Hollowell, head of the Michigan Democratic Party; museum chair Rod Gillum, who also serves as a vice president at General Motors Corp.; Bill Pickard, owner of a plastics manufacturing firm, and Vivian Carpenter, president of Atwater Enterprises and chairwoman of the Black Chamber of Commerce.

"If anyone is going to save the museum, it was the people in that room," said Archer, who said he began the second meeting with a plea to bail out the museum.

"We're all active in other charity causes, but Judge Keith knew that we had to step up for this cause," he said. "If the museum fails, they'd say, 'Too bad they let it fail -- whoever 'they' are.' "

Responding to Keith's call to meet began a new chapter in the museum's history.

"Failure is not an option," Polk said. "But it will require work."

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