

Crown Heights Without Hype

A neighborhood history project goes big-time after the riots.

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A not-so-funny thing happened to the organizers of the Crown Heights History Project on their way to the opening on Wednesday, April 13: the Crown Heights riots of 1991.

Co-directors Craig Wilder, an assistant professor of history at Long Island University, and Jill Vexler, a cultural anthropologist and independent curator, had conceived of the project a year before the riots erupted, planning to represent the Jews and blacks of the neighborhood through oral histories, "artifacts" that evoke life-as-lived, video, photographs, walking tours and topical forums.

One might have thought the disturbances would have killed the project. Instead they had the opposite effect.

Arthur Gelb, head of The New York Times Company Foundation, read the riots as a sociocultural red flag and whipped his fellow philanthropists into a whirl of largesse. The result was a torrent of funding for the project from more than a dozen benefactors, including The Times, Ford, Rockefeller, Paley and Revson foundations, as well as Morgan Charitable Trust, Chase Manhattan Bank and the New York State Council on the Arts.

What began as an ambitious foray into modern museum-exhibit science is about to open as one of the biggest shows in town.

In an unprecedented strategy, the Crown Heights History Project will divide its exhibit between three Brooklyn institutions. The Brooklyn Historical Society, at 128 Pierrepont St., will challenge popular myths about Crown Heights by depicting the actual lives of its residents — "starting from the bottom up," in the words of Wilder — looking both at the forces that brought Lubavitcher Jews, African Americans and Caribbean Americans to the neighborhood and at the sources of conflict, not only between the disparate groups but within them.

The Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford-Stuyvesant History, at 1698 Bergen St., will highlight the African diaspora in Crown Heights, walking visitors into the lives of emigrants from Jamaica, Haiti and Nigeria, and from South Carolina, over a span of six decades.

And the Brooklyn Children's Museum, at 145 Brooklyn Ave., will use interactive exhibits to challenge young visi-



Sunday services at Charity Roman Catholic Church are among the images captured in the Crown Heights History Project.

Photo by Rodney K. Hurley

tors to reflect on their own life experiences in comparison with those of their Crown Heights peers. One exhibit will show reconstructed children's bedrooms accessorized to small details.

For Vexler, planning for the Children's Museum show became a refining process for setting up the other shows.

"You've got to know your subject thoroughly to tell it to a child," Vexler said. "Once you've worked it out, it becomes the molecule for the more complex story."

Also on the program are a flurry of public events that include afternoons of popular Jewish music and Afro-Caribbean percussion, puppet theater, walking tours for adults and children, and panels on media misrepresentation of the neighborhood and what daily life is like in the words of residents. (For further information, call 718-624-0890.)

For project directors and the personnel who worked with them, the effort became as much a learning experience as they hope it will be for their target audience. For example, on the sensitive question of the riots, Craig Wilder reports

that the subjects of their oral history expeditions tended not to bring them up at all. And contrary to one popular, if partly accurate stereotype, Lubavitcher parents were heard voicing an adamant determination not to raise their children as racists.

Project backers hope the three-way exhibit will become part of the longer-range prospectus of healing for post-riot Crown Heights, citing their own unwritten 11th Commandment, "Thou shalt coexist."

With all its thoughtfully considered talk of "diversity" and "journeys," will the Crown Heights History Project point to securely moored common ground for the Jews and blacks who inhabit its terrain?

For Jill Vexler, the answer comes in the form of a question that all people, of all shades of skin and belief, invariably find themselves asking, not only in Crown Heights but everywhere in the United States: "How American do we become?" □