

“Without Sanctuary” bears witness

By Robert C. “Chip” Harrod, President & CEO, BRIDGES for a Just Community

On Tuesday, January 19, the Freedom Center will open a powerful exhibit entitled *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*. Teaming up with the Freedom Center in presenting this important exhibit are senior partners the Urban League of Greater Cincinnati and BRIDGES for a Just Community along with three dozen leading civic organizations. The exhibition will be on display through May 31, 2010.

Lynching is a heinous part of our country’s history. Similar to the powerful exhibits one finds in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum that honor the lost lives of millions of Jews and other victims of Hitler’s Final Solution, this exhibition honors and pays respect to the victims of lynching.

Without Sanctuary depicts an important chapter in American history that many would prefer to forget. This exhibit gives us an opportunity to look back at this era of overt racial prejudice and mob violence, to bear witness to and honor the tragic victims and righteous resisters from this history, and to be vigilant and keep watch over those without sanctuary today, those in our society who remain vulnerable to hate crimes – racial, religious and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, in particular.

Without Sanctuary was previously shown --- to large crowds --- in New York City, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, Jackson MS and Atlanta. The exhibition’s centerpiece is a collection of photographs, postcards and memorabilia from various lynching events in the United States in the early decades of the 20th Century. Although the killings were not confined to a period, place, or race, an estimated 5,000 African-Americans died by lynching between 1882 and 1968.

Unfortunately, hate crimes are still with us. The Southern Poverty Law Center in Atlanta has documented a staggering 926 hate groups operating in America today, a 50% increase over the past decade. According to the FBI, the number of hate crimes against blacks and religious groups has increased with nearly 8,000 hate crime-related incidents reported in 2008.

Additionally, it is important to remember that this era of overt racial bigotry and hate crimes had an unintended consequence: it gave rise to the

establishment of several seminal civil rights organizations, including the NAACP, the National Urban League, and our own BRIDGES for a Just Community – previously the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ).

So, why is the Freedom Center sponsoring an exhibit of such horrific subject matter? It is doing so, like any true institution of conscience, for one reason: because it must!

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