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New Automotive Hall of Fame exhibit to honor African Americans

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Automotive Hall of Fame Museum

The Automotive Hall of Fame

The Automotive Hall of Fame is developing a new, permanent exhibit and educational program that will highlight the contributions of African Americans in the automotive industry.

Founded in 1939 at The World's Fair, the Automotive Hall of Fame has honored nearly 800 individuals from around the world who have impacted and influenced the automotive and mobility industries.

There have been some African American people recognized, "however we realize that there are Black people that have contributed to the automotive industry in the past that we have not recognized and that they are under-represented," Executive Director Sarah Cook said.

"We plan to highlight several key aspects of Black contributions that created the industry, including the labor, invention, design, engineering, and leadership that created the modern automotive manufacturing industry," Cook said.

The exhibit and educational program will explore how mobility, vehicle ownership and roadways have impacted Black communities in Detroit, throughout the country and around the world, and will focus on first-hand oral histories of Black leaders, both historic and contemporary.

"This is a big shift for the hall. It is in response to our culture shift ...we've had in the country," Cook said.

Automotive Hall of Fame Museum

Sarah Cook, executive director, Automotive Hall of Fame Museum

Over the past year, the Automotive Hall of Fame established a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, led by board member Hiram Jackson, CEO of Real Times Media.

"Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is a priority for the Automotive Hall of Fame. Not just as it relates to inductees but on our board, in our staff, and in the programming we create," Jackson said in a release.

"I won't pretend that we're proud of our past around diversity, but what I can assure you is that the way forward will be starkly different. This initiative is just an exciting first step of many demonstrating the organization's commitment to ensure people of color are properly represented as part of the fabric of the automotive industry."

General Motors Co., whose vice president of corporate giving, Terry Rhadigan, serves on the museum's board, made a \$500,000 grant to the museum to support development of the new exhibit and educational program, "Black Innovation, Invention, and Leadership in Mobility," over a one-year period. The museum is looking to launch the new exhibit and related digital content in February 2023.

"AHF's efforts to create and share knowledge will spark social change through general education and promote new learning and career opportunities for our next generation of mobility leaders and influencers," Rhadigan said in the release.

Hiram Jackson

The GM grant is supporting the hiring of project consultant Micala Evans, a noted scholar of African American Studies, to lead curatorial work and research for the new exhibition under a two-year contract, and the permanent hire of Kathleen Donald as the new vice president of operations and programs. In this newly created role, Donald will help lead the museum's reimagination efforts.

With the new hires, the museum, which is operating on a budget of just under \$1 million, has a staff of 13.

Research work to identify lesser-known, African American contributors to the automotive industry is just beginning through the collection of oral histories that will be included in the exhibition, along with expected artifacts and other related materials, Cook said. The exhibition is likely to grow and evolve as more stories are uncovered and future contributions from African Americans are recognized, Cook said.

In connection with the new exhibition, the museum is developing a K-12 educational curriculum, something that's expected to provide an opportunity for expanded field trips to the museum and to draw people of all ages to the museum, she said.

Located next door to The Henry Ford in Dearborn, the Automotive Hall of Fame Museum includes 11,000 square feet of exhibits, including 15 vehicles highlighting the contributions of some inductees and honorees. It provides educational programs and enthusiast events for the public like Mustang Day.

Inline Play

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