

OPINION

African American history is American history: The power of never giving up

The Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture celebrates its 10th anniversary. Georgia Congressman John Lewis helped fight to establish this institution.



Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., speaks at the dedication ceremony for the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington in September 2016. (Pablo Martinez Monsivais/AP)

By Michael Collins – For The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

2 minutes ago

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“Keep your eyes on the prize.”

These words were often spoken and always lived by the late Congressman John Lewis, D-Georgia. As we mark the 10th anniversary of the [Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture](#), they have never meant more.

The museum opened Sept. 24, 2016, but the dream behind it was more than a century old. Generations of African Americans understood the need for an institution that would preserve our history, honor our contributions and tell the full story of America.

In the 1980s, [Congressman Mickey Leland](#), D-Texas, revived the effort. After Leland's untimely death in a plane crash, Lewis picked up the torch. Beginning in the 1980s, [he introduced legislation](#) in Congress to establish a national museum devoted to African American history and culture.



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For 15 years, that legislation met opposition, delay and procedural obstruction. There were countless opportunities to walk away. But Lewis believed the museum was too important to abandon. He was persistent and consistent. He never gave in. He never gave up.

That was the essence of John Lewis. When he saw something that was not right, fair or just, he acted. When he saw something meaningful that could move America closer to a more perfect union, he was willing to get in the way.

The effort eventually brought together Democrats and Republicans from both chambers of Congress. Dedicated members, congressional staff and advocates worked year after year to keep the dream alive because Lewis understood that no great movement succeeds on the strength of one person. Progress requires people willing to keep working when victory is uncertain.

Museum will stand up to erasure and attempts to restrict how history is taught

In 2001, Congress created a presidential commission to plan the museum. Two years later, it passed legislation establishing the institution outright. President George W. Bush signed the bill into law on Dec. 16, 2003, a bipartisan victory and a national achievement that opened an equally demanding new chapter.

Under founding director Lonnie G. Bunch III, the museum moved from aspiration to reality. He and his team designed the building, raised the necessary funds and collected artifacts carrying the memories of generations.

In the process, Bunch became something more than an administrator: a steward of memory, a defender of truth, a keeper of the American legacy. Together, Lewis and Bunch built more than a museum. They built a sacred national space.

When it finally opened, Lewis witnessed the fulfillment of a decadeslong dream. Its stories of slavery and freedom, segregation and resistance, sorrow and celebration reveal the resilience, faith and courage of African Americans. The museum reminds us that African American history is not separate from American history.

It is American history.



Michael Collins is board chair and interim president of the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation. (Courtesy of the John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation)

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On the museum's 10th anniversary, we both celebrate the museum and pledge to protect it from efforts across the country to [restrict how history is taught](#) and to erase uncomfortable truths from our national memory.

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By Alpine Helen/White County CVB



Lewis often felt the force of these turbulent winds, but he would not retreat. He would tell us not to be lost in a sea of despair, but to keep our heads up, stand firm and move forward.



Lucille Simpson, far right, and her daughter Gwendolyn Norman, both from Detroit, Mich., wait in line to enter the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Cultural on the National Mall in Washington, Monday, May 1, 2017. The hottest ticket in Washington right now is for the new museum, where thousands of tickets are snapped up each month within minutes of being released, a full seven months after the museum opened. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

^ Less

Lewis showed that persistence is an active form of faith

As [Bunch concludes](#) his historic Smithsonian tenure, we honor his leadership best by recommitting ourselves to preserving the truth. We cannot let political pressure, fear or discomfort decide which parts of the American story may be remembered.

The museum was not built to divide America. It was built to help America understand itself. It teaches us that progress is never automatic. It happens because ordinary people decide that injustice is unacceptable and summon the courage to act.



FILE - Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution Lonnie Bunch speaks at an event, Feb. 20, 2026, in Washington. (AP Photo/Allison Robbert, File)

That is where Lewis picked up the work. It is where we must pick it up now.



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His example teaches us that persistence is an active form of faith. It means returning after disappointment, rebuilding after defeat, speaking again and believing again. The museum proves that worthy causes can survive opposition, delay and doubt when committed people refuse to surrender.

That must be the enduring lesson of this 10th anniversary.

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When you see something meaningful, get in the way. When truth is threatened, defend it. When the winds turn turbulent, keep walking.

Never give in. Never give up.

Keep the faith and keep your eyes on the prize.

Michael Collins is the board chair and interim president of the [John and Lillian Miles Lewis Foundation](#).

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