

Oak Bluffs' Renaissance House Offers Artists a Place of Respite

By DELLA BROWN HARDMAN

July was the time for the initial opening of the Helene Johnson and Dorothy West Foundation for Artists in Need. More than 500 persons responded with letters of application, and there were fewer than 20 artists who could be accommodated. The setting was the Renaissance House on the Oval, a residence house for artists. The Renaissance House is the former home of Helene Johnson, a Harlem Renaissance poet who lived next door to the home of her cousin, Dorothy West, the Harlem Renaissance novelist. Ms. West's best-selling novel, *The Wedding*, was set in the Oval. These cousins spent summers together on the Vineyard. Dorothy West spent the last 30 years of her life at her cottage in the historic Highlands, just behind East Chop.

Abigail McGrath, the daughter of Helene Johnson, is the organizer of the foundation. She quotes her mother as saying, "In order to write, a person needs time in which to do nothing, to simply stare out a window and let thoughts come to them." Abigail states that all artists need down time, especially those with a family or a 9 to 5 job. Seldom does a working person have the opportunity to simply stare into space and let thoughts come to them, and this is what is needed, she concluded.

The Renaissance House provides that time and space. Undoubtedly the Vineyard is the ideal setting for such activity. There were no rules regarding the amount of work to be produced while here, but on Friday evenings, the works were shared by the artists and the public was invited to enjoy the activity in the garden setting in the Oval.

Abigail McGrath wanted the artists to learn a bit about the Vineyard by having a number of living Vineyard legends participate in the program at evening salons. Among the artists who met with the participants were Donna Allen, artist; Pam Benjamin, visual artist; Nat Benjamin, ship builder; Fred Collins, civil rights attorney; Phil Craig, mystery writer; Shirley Craig, writer; Robert Hayden, historian; Isabell Powell, widow of Adam Clayton Powell, and Ella Tulin, sculptor. These activities were reinforced with salons at which there were dinner guests, porch parties, picnics and clambakes.

Among the artists who participated in this artistic retreat were the following:

Pamela Booker is a New York writer who has several performance works, critical articles and feature stories to her credit. Too, she has presented scholarly articles internationally at universities in Spain, France and Oxford, as well as at institutions in the United States. Currently, she is at work on her first novel, *Mamie's Mirrors*.

Michelle Simms-Burton, PhD, is a professor of American literature at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. While here she worked on her novel, a work in progress, *At Home in the Night*. Her essays, book reviews, poems and short stories have been widely published. Her scholarly work, *Narra-*

tives of Black Bourgeois Desire: Examining the Class Line in 20th Century U.S. Women's Fiction, will be published by the University of Illinois Press.

Sandra Gary Amani graduated from Brooklyn College summa cum laude with a BA degree in English literature. Currently, she is working on an anthology of short stories in which the lives of their multicultural characters converge as they search for wholeness, meaning and sanity in an antagonistic world, she said.

Barbara Moss is a clinical hypnotherapist who is also a former magician, cabaret singer and actress. She is a published writer and is working on a one-woman show at present.

Eric Gerrard Parsons has recently completed a novel, *The Silence of Blackbirds*, and is currently seeking a publisher. From Seattle, he was a 2001 Jack Straw Writers Fellow and his poetry has been published in several journals and magazines.

Arleigh Prelow is an independent documentary filmmaker and writer whose home is in Berkeley, Calif. Her current project is a documentary about the life, work and spiritual journey of Dr. Howard Thurman, spiritual leader and thinker whose period at Boston University is well remembered here. In *Search of the Sacred* was produced for the Smithsonian Institution and is a major credit among her works.

Russell Robertson lived in Japan for nine years. He is working on a memoir that documents that experience that found him immersed into Japanese culture as an African American.

Mary D. Wheeler, an Atlanta mother of four and grandmother of three, writes poetry which reflects the depth of feeling in the lives of all people. Among her titles are *All Your Life*, *Your Arms Are My Comfort* and *Speak to My Heart*. She is currently at work on a love poem, *Forever*, that embraces the challenge of finding one's inner self.

Carole Ita White is a productive actress and writer who has been associated with film and television since the early 1970s. You may remember her as Big Rosie on *Laverne and Shirley*. Too, you may have seen her in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Fabulous Baker Boys*. Look for her this winter in the upcoming film, *Deadly*.



ARLEIGH PRELOW, FILMMAKER, AND MARY WHEELER, POET.

Mrs. McGrath said, "Most programs such as this are sponsored by wealthy patrons. Mrs. Dodge has one, McDowell has another. I created the Helene Johnson and Dorothy West Foundation for Artists in Need out of hope and spirit, and almost no money at all. I can see that there is a need for funding, but if I waited for that I might never have been able to see its fruition. So, I may have to add a

little water to my soup this year, but at least I'm not standing around waiting for things to happen."

Those fortunate enough to participate in either of the Friday evening activities recognize the value of this endeavor, and extend to Abigail McGrath the best of good wishes as she makes plans now for the summer of 2005, in the Oval.



RENAISSANCE HOUSE, FORMER HOME OF A POET, NOW SERVES AS ARTISTS COLONY.