The Importance of Being “NICE”

The Carlton A. Funn, Sr. Collection

Alexandria Black History Museum
Started in the 1950s by a young seventh grade history teacher in Alexandria, *The Funn Collection*, consists of over 1,490 exhibition display boards created by Carlton A. Funn, Sr. until his death in 2012. They vary in theme and style but are designed to “promote awareness, human dignity and cultural understanding” and above all else to encourage everyone to be *nice*. 
Born in Alexandria, Virginia on January 29, 1932, Carlton A. Funn, Sr. was a Parker-Gray High School alumnus.

He received a B.A. from Storer College and an M.A. in Education from Virginia State University, before returning to his native Alexandria to teach in the public school system.
In 1957, a new state commissioned textbook was produced for seventh grade social studies teaching. It was entitled, “Virginia: History, Government, and Geography” and was one of a series of three new books for different grades that presented a view of Virginia’s past, especially regarding slavery, that owed more to political agendas than to historical fact.

The text and illustrations provided a view of “happy slaves” who enjoyed their work and their lives under their benevolent and caring masters. The books remained official State approved books until the early 1970s.

Image courtesy of the Alexandria Libraries Local History and Special Collections
Funn was dismayed at the lack of positive representation and the distorted version of history within the school textbooks. He began to purchase posters, books, pamphlets, artifacts and more, to broaden the narrative he could teach and make his class of thirty students "aware of their positive heritage".
Funn worked with the *Association for the Study of Negro History and Life*, specialty shops and other vendors to acquire the materials for his growing collection.
The material he amassed grew into Funn’s first exhibit, entitled, “The Afro-American Experience” and took his collection beyond his classroom.
Funn’s collection was used in a six week pilot Black Studies program in Alexandria in 1968, attended by 91 students and with Funn as one of the instructors.

Alexandria Public Schools went on to provide further Black Studies courses at T.C. Williams High School for Juniors and Seniors.
Requests for the collection followed and Funn took his growing exhibit and lectures around the country to a variety of venues including community centers, and military and government agencies.
On May 29th 1970, 19-year old Robin Gibson, an African American, was shot and killed by a white employee at a 7-Eleven in Alexandria. For the next week the City erupted with firebombing and rioting. Eventually the violence calmed but the tension remained.

Funn approached the Alexandria Police Department with the idea of bringing his Black Studies lectures and his collection to the officers. Within three weeks of the murder, Funn gave his first of four sessions at the Police Department.

The newspaper articles on the left and right of this board, dated June 19th and July 11th 1970, detail the program that Funn undertook. The photograph shows Funn speaking to the group of white police officers, with boards from his collection lining the walls behind them.
Funn soon widened his scope beyond the African American experience, creating his second exhibit in the early 1970s entitled, “The History and Culture of Minorities”.

Eventually he used the name “National/International Cultural Exhibits (NICE)” and stated that the purpose of his exhibit was: “to promote awareness, human dignity and cultural understanding”.

National/International Cultural Exhibits
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Carlton A. Funn - Exhibitor
For Funn it was not enough to simply teach his class of 7th graders their own histories. He wanted to teach all people the positive impact that we all have on the world. People from all countries, religions, cultures, men, women and children create a diversity that enriches us all. He believed that with this greater knowledge would come a pride in ourselves and our own self-worth, and a respect for all.
The collection grew to almost 1,500 display boards featuring a variety of mediums, including handwritten text and drawings, newspaper articles, photographs, and mounted poster series on a variety of topics. The scope of the collection broadened to include international topics, such as the Holocaust.
For Funn, “in order to understand today and tomorrow, you have to understand yesterday”.

He believed in the importance of learning our own and others’ heritages to promote understanding and pride in everyone’s contribution to the world.
Speaking to *The Washington Post* in 1972, Funn stated that the exhibit was, “a commitment to showing and teaching more people than I ever could in one classroom. I feel good inside every time I show this collection”.

This board from c.1990 is mounted with a typed list of the venues that Funn had presented his exhibit. Of the 301 entries, the majority are in Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia, but they include venues in Texas, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maine.

In addition to schools, colleges, community centers and churches, Funn exhibited at Federal and military facilities, and in Federal prisons. He also appeared on the *Joe Paige* television show in 1973.
In the 1972 Washington Post article, Funn also commented that “kids need heroes”. By illustrating the achievements of people from a diverse range of backgrounds and heritages, attaining greatness in the fields of entertainment, the military, as inventors, entrepreneurs, public servants and more, he helped to broaden the scope of heroes and role models visible to new generations of children.
Funn also celebrated the achievements of his fellow Alexandrians. He always highlighted when people were products of the Alexandria Public School System, such as Parker-Gray Alum, Earl Lloyd.
There are boards dedicated to Alexandria’s former Mayor, William D. Euille, the Reverend Dr. Faye S. Gunn, from Alfred Baptist Church, and Alexandrians in the Armed Forces and business.
There are boards for important events in Alexandria’s Civil Rights Movement, such as the 1939 Alexandria Library sit-in, as well as boards to highlight Alexandria’s *Living Legends*, such as Ferdinand T. Day and Vola Lawson. Funn himself was recognized as a *Living Legend* in the class of 2009.
In addition to providing role models, Funn had a range of boards that promoted the idea of self-worth. The “Self-Esteem” range of boards gave guidance on how to think positively and reach your full potential, as one of the boards states, “Your Attitude Determines Your Altitude!” There were also boards with anti-drug and anti-violence messages.
This theme expanded into a new program by Funn entitled, “You’re A Shining Star”.

Funn was also involved in organizations that furthered this work such as the “The Grandfather’s Group”, which provided connections between young African American boys and positive adult male mentors or “grandfathers”.
Funn was president of the Alexandria Society for Preservation of Black Heritage (ASPBH).

The ASPBH has sponsored a poster contest (now poster exhibition) for Martin Luther King, Jr. Each year the event has a theme that echoes the work and legacy of Dr. King.
Funn taught in public schools for over forty years. After teaching at Lyles-Crouch Elementary School in Alexandria, he moved to Robert E. Lee Middle School, and then to Hollin Meadows in Fairfax before finally moving to the District of Columbia at Park View Elementary and ending his formal teaching career at Hine Jr. High School in 1997.

Wherever he taught he took his collection and his philosophy with him. Exhibitions of his collection and events inspired by it were photographed and mounted on their own boards to become a part of the collection.
These boards are from a series of photographs of an African Americans in the Military/Buffalo Soldiers event at a school. The event was attended by Major Lee Bowman and Funn displayed his exhibition and gave a lecture using his boards. The photographs also illustrate a drill by the School’s Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).
The impact of Funn’s collection and his exhibitions was felt across the City of Alexandria and beyond.

Congressman Jim Moran stated in the 1998 Congressional Record, “Your work has inspired and taught young children and adults everywhere the value of contributions made by African-Americans and other minorities.”
The Funn Collection includes a scrapbook filled with articles from local and national newspapers about African Americans, including articles about Funn’s own work. At the back of the scrapbook are copies of printed handouts to accompany his exhibition.
In 1940, Booker T. Washington became the first African American to be featured on a United States Postal Service stamp. In 1978 the USPS launched the Black Heritage Stamp series, starting with Harriet Tubman. Funn collected the advertising posters for the series, which he mounted for display.
There were boards mounted with posters of famous African Americans throughout the Twentieth Century.
There were also boards mounted with poster series on a variety of topics, including these for Howard University Hospital and the history of Harlem, New York.
Funn collected a wide range of material on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and addressed his work, his ideology and his legacy, including the celebration of MLK Jr. Day and the MLK Jr. monument.
In his 70s Funn was still creating new display boards for the exhibition. New additions included a large series of boards celebrating the election, and re-election, of President Barack Obama.

"Life is precious, and part of its beauty lies in its diversity"

- President Obama
In 2013, over 1,490 boards from the Carton A. Funn Sr. collection were donated to the Alexandria Black History Museum by his children, Carlton Jr., Marc, and Tracye. The Museum has catalogued and photographed the entire collection. The collection is now available to view using the Office of Historic Alexandria online collections website. Click here to start your adventure through the Funn Collection....

https://historicalalexandria.pastperfectonline.com/

Please note that the Carlton Funn Collection consists of educational materials created from the 1950s to the 2010s and some of the information and language used may be outdated or incorrect. Please be aware of this when choosing materials to use with students. Also note that some content, such as graphic images of the Holocaust, may be upsetting to viewers.