Concordia to host ‘Soul of Philanthropy’ exhibit

By Janet George
For the Hollywood Star News

A philanthropist isn’t that a person with lots of money who donates to an organization or institution? Well, yes, but that definition is too narrow for Valerie Fullwood. Philanthropists also include people of little means who help their neighbors and bring positive change to their communities.

Fullwood, a North Carolina writer and consultant, has teamed with photographer Charles W. Thomas Jr. to produce a 400-page book, "Giving Back: A Trillabe to Generations of African American Philanthropists," which captures the portraits of people and their stories of giving and generosity that have transformed society.

The book has grown into an exhibit, "Giving Back: The Soul of Philanthropy: Reframed and Exhibited." It will open with a reception from 6-9 p.m. Jan. 13 and continue through March at Concordia University’s George R. White Library & Learning Center, 2000 N.E. Liberty St.

The exhibit includes numerous photographic prints on metal, iPad books, video and interactive digital apps featuring music, poetry, narratives and more, said Dimeji Onafowora, the designer of the first exhibit in North Carolina who recently moved to Portland and will install the Concordia show.

The Concordia exhibit is the first full-scale event for "The Soul of Philanthropy," outside Southeastern states, although smaller events were in Eugene and Salem in mid-2016, said Carol Tatch. She is the major giving director for the MBG Foundation, which helped bring the exhibit to Oregon.

The 40-year-old foundation started as the McKenzie River Gathering, using funds inherited by founders Leslie Brockbank and her husband, Charles Gray. MBG’s mission is "to inspire people to work together for justice and mobilize resources for Oregon communities as they build collective power to change the world."

Information in the exhibit meshes with the work of MBG Foundation, Tatch said, and when she happened to see the exhibit in North Carolina, she related, "I said ‘Yes.’"

One reason she wanted to bring the exhibit to Portland was because, she said, "I became aware of the absence of anything that linked African Americans to their own culture here."

She started seeking a place with the space and other accommodations for the exhibit. After 10 months of searching, she connected with Linda Churchill, director of Multicultural Arts and Events at Concordia’s libraries.

"We are honored to serve as the first host site outside the Southeast United States for this touring exhibit to showcase the important contributions of African Americans in transforming society: a mission the university shares," Church said.

Although the exhibit includes the varied stories of African Americans, Tatch said, the basic message could be applied to Hispanics, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders and others whose contributions to society are often overlooked.

"It’s not a Black story. It’s not an African story. It’s our story," she said. "It’s really just about love and giving."

And that, of course, reflects the meaning of the Greek word, philanthropos, from which philanthropy is drawn. It means "love for mankind," according to the Random House/Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.

In the exhibit, visitors can see, touch and write in various sections, Tatch said. At iPod stations, for instance, they can hear people’s stories. They can use a cell phone and code to learn more about a photograph.

One of the people who inspired Fullwood’s book and the exhibit is her great-aunt Dora Atlas. While meditating during a spiritual retreat several years ago, Aunt Dora heard a message: "Feed the hungry.

She started serving free daily meals in what Fullwood called "a fragile part of town." Her Our Daily Bread Kitchen Inc. has grown and serves more than 10,000 people a year.

Fullwood also cited Antoine Williams, a founding member of God City Art Collective, which gives workshops in schools and arranges art shows and music events to show the cultural opportunities available for African Americans.

"We draw with kids and talk to them about life," Williams told Fullwood. "So many kids have a limited view of what black people can do. Our presence says, ‘You can be an artist.’"

Fullwood advises those reading the book or visiting the exhibit to look at what the philanthropist decided to act, how they engaged, who benefited from their actions and where they made an impact.

"The insights gained can guide our philanthropy," she writes, "and thereby strengthen our communities."