

## 'America I AM' debuts at Constitution Center

**Bobbi Booker**  
Tribune Staff Writer

On the eve of Martin Luther King's birthday, radio and TV personality Tavis Smiley joined Mayor Michael Nutter and Cornel West before cutting the ribbon at the National Constitution Center for the traveling exhibition, "America I AM: The African American Imprint." Tavis, who conceived this exhibit two years ago, sought to answer a question posed by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 work, "The Souls of Black Folk": "Would America have been America without her Negro people?"

The resounding answer is "No!" With over 300 artifacts set up in an interactive and video exhibits over 13,000 square feet, "America: I AM" explores four centuries of the Black experience in a manner that both informs and unifies.

"I don't want to cast aspersions on people," explained Tavis. "I'm not trying to blame people. This is not an exhibit about slavery. This is a celebration of the contributions that African Americans have made to this country politically, socially, economically and spiritually. How have we made such a huge imprint on this country given where we started from arriving in Jamestown as slaves in shackles and chains? How have these special people made such a significant contribution?"

At the VIP preview event — that feted more than 400 Philadelphians — had a first glimpse of the \$4 million exhibit, which will continue from here in May for a 10-city, 4-year tour. Many of the gathered were excit-

ed not only to view the exhibit, but also about the upcoming official King Day celebrations and impending inauguration of America's first African-American president Barack Obama.

"For more than a couple of weeks, I've been saying that we are about to come upon one of the most emotional and important times in this country's history," intoned Nutter. "I think this exhibit helps to not only tell the story and go through the artifacts, but when you think about the history of African-American people in this country, we're talking about folks who went from the outhouse to one who will occupy the White House. We're talking about folk who came from cotton fields to one who will soon be in the Rose Garden. In 1960, a great year of change, the president at that time said that by the end of the decade we should be able to put a man on the moon. Forty years later, we're about to put an African-American man in the White House of the United States of America. This is a great country."

Exhibit highlights include DuBois' Harvard graduation robe, an abolitionist's defensive cudgel used by the "league of Massachusetts Freemen" when confronted with slave hunters, a rare American flag used by a "Black brigade" in Cincinnati during the Civil War, porcelain figurines of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, separate bathroom signs from 1927 labeled "White Ladies" and "Colored Women," a "Bill of Sale" certifying that friends had purchased Frederick Douglass's freedom for \$711.66 in 1846, a model of a small screaming Black

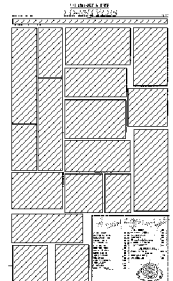
baby whose wide-open red mouth was meant to be used as an ash tray, miniature Ku Klux Klan figures that look like chessmen, the door key and stool from King's Birmingham jail cell.

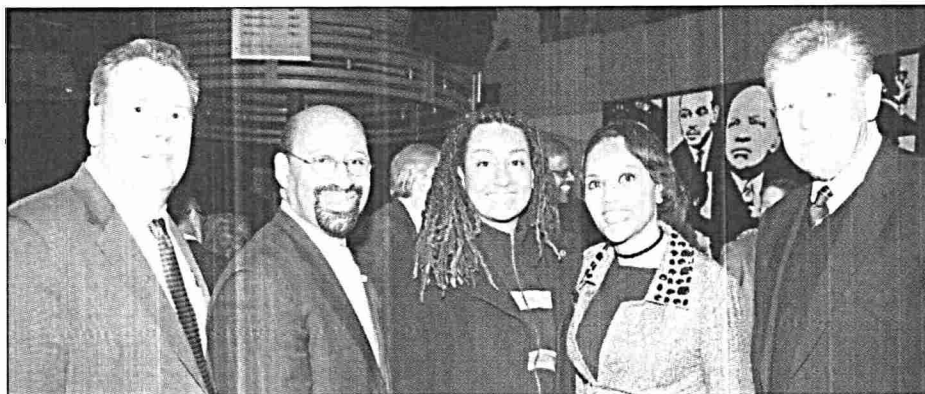
Throughout the evening, West beamed as he chatted with attendees, especially the teens and young adults whom he pointedly made extra time for.

"I'm just so deeply moved to be here," said West during the pre-event press conference. "It seems to me that it is very important for all of us to acknowledge the way in which this particular exhibition points so far beyond itself, not just to Black people, who were an enslaved people who in the face of slavery talk about freedom; a Jim Crowed people who in the face of that kind of terrorism talk about rights and liberty; a hated people, who in the face of that kind of hatred talk about love.

"Justice is what love looks like in public, and you see the story of those particular Africans, that slice of humanity, it's a story not just of Black people, it's a story not just of Americans — it's a story of human beings in the modern world extending their own sense of possibility. You're going to see human beings with tremendous dignity putting forward their own sense of humanity.

"America I Am: The African American Imprint" opened on Jan. 15 and runs through May 3 at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. For more information, call (215) 409-6700 or visit [americalam.org](http://americalam.org) and [constitutioncenter.org](http://constitutioncenter.org).





From left, Francis X. McGorry, president and CEO, the Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Company; Mayor Michael Nutter; Lisa Nutter; Tracie Hunt, vice president of Human Resources, the Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Company; and John MacDonald.



Joyce Smiley, the mother of Tavis Smiley was on hand for the exhibition.



From left, District Attorney Lynne Abraham, Judge Leon Tucker and Judge Petrese Tucker.



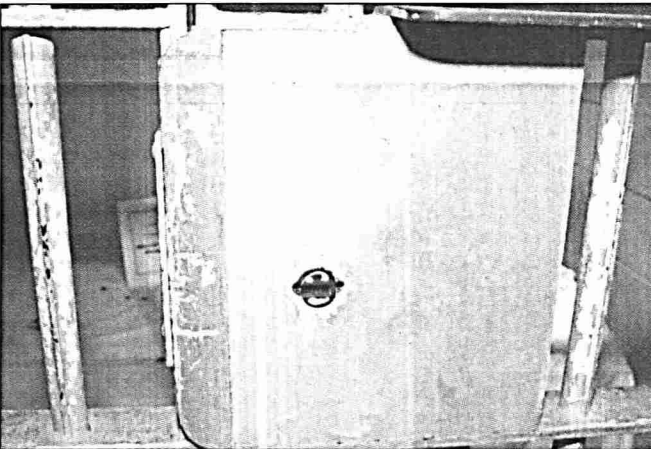
Tavis Smiley and Cornel West were among the first to tour the "America I AM: The African American Imprint," at the National Constitution Center on Wednesday. Smiley was one of the organizers of the exhibit. - PHOTOS: ROBERT MENDELSON



From left, Tyrone Richards, principal of Woodrow Wilson High in Camden, N.J.; Patty Jackson of WDAS-FM; Lori Wilson of NBC 10; and Vanesse Lloyd-Sgambati, founder of The Literary Group.



Rosa Park's arrest sheet and fingerprints.



Jail cell door and door key from the Birmingham cell where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was held following the 1963 Birmingham campaigns. The infamous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" was authored behind this cell door.

- PHOTO BIRMINGHAM CIVIL RIGHTS INSTITUTE



James Early, director of cultural heritage policy for the Smithsonian Institute, greets Tavis Smiley.



This is the robe that Muhammad Ali wore as he trained in Kinshasa, Zaire, leading to the "Rumble in the Jungle" fight Oct. 30, 1974. Arguably the biggest upset in boxing history occurred when Ali defeated world heavyweight champion George Foreman to reclaim his former title.

- PHOTO ROBERT MENDELSON



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Phillis Wheatley writing table, ca.1760. "Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral," was the first book of poetry by a Black American, published in London in 1773.

- PHOTO MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY.



The Rev. Alyn Waller, pastor of Enon Baptist Church, right, is pictured with his family, Morgan, 17, left, Erika, 16, and his wife Ellyn.

Guitar belonging to music icon Prince. Prince played this guitar during the memorable half-time show of SuperBowl XLI in Miami, Fla., in 2006.

— PHOTO ERIN DE JAUREGUI



From left, poet Sonia Sanchez and Tavis Smiley.