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Council presents proclamation on Black History Month to Stuart House

By Sora O'Doherty



Stuart House (center) marching in Montgomery, Alabama. Photo provided

During items for the good of the city at the Feb. 16 Orinda City Council meeting, members presented a proclamation recognizing Black History Month to Stuart House, the Orinda Union School District director of facilities, owing to his historic work with the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, Alabama.

In accepting the proclamation, House spoke of his history with the civil rights movement, which he joined when he was just 13 years old. Almost 56 years ago House participated in the civil rights movement in Selma, Alabama as a part of the voting rights effort led by King. House worked with King, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the other civil rights organizations supporting the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which, House noted, is up for consideration again by the Congress.

"It's a John Lewis bill," House told the council. "John Lewis and I worked very closely together as well, and he was a good friend of mine."

House, who has also served on the Traffic Safety Commission, has been a resident of Orinda for the past 16 years, living with his wife Kathleen, who served on the Art in Public Places and the Parks & Rec commissions, in the home he built himself.

In 1926, Carter Goodwin Wilson, a Black historian, established a week to recognize the accomplishments of Black American citizens. Wilson chose the second week in February because it coincided with the birthday of Abraham Lincoln on Feb. 12 and that of Frederick Douglass on Feb. 14. The month of February is now recognized as Black History Month.

House came from a Michigan community of well-to-do African Americans and from what he understood to be a not so atypical African American family. His dad was a psychiatrist, and his mother was a teacher with a master's degree. He had an aunt who was circuit court judge, and another who was a noted chemist. His step-father was a Yale law school graduate, who graduated from Yale at 18 years old. His grandparents were both college graduates in Mississippi who graduated from Alcorn College.

"We were a very well-to-do family. I lived in a community of other African Americans who were also very well-to-do, very much like Orinda," House said. "A lot of people don't know this about African Americans."

In accepting the proclamation, House said, "I have spent my entire life working for freedom, justice, diversity and inclusion, and I commend the city council for its efforts in that area and for its resolutions and proclamations and this proclamation for Black History Month." He added, "It's important that we do this, and we have a lot of work to do, as you well know."

He expressed his pride in his neighbors, many of whom are in industry, corporations, and professions like lawyers, as well as others who have stepped up to the Black Lives Matter movement, which, he said, he thinks is just amazing and wonderful and needed.

"It makes me very proud about the Orindans who have exercised their conscience about these matters of injustice around the world and in this country," he said, acknowledging the council's efforts to raise their own consciousness, and noting how the Orinda Union School District among staff and its board, are helping people take a deeper dive into understanding and fighting racism. "It's so insidious and so pervasive and so institutional, so we've got to work hard at understanding it and its manifestations, and rooting it out so that we can ultimately have a community that respects all human beings of every race, creed, color, nationality, and in the spirit of Dr. King and his vision, his dream."

Mayor Amy Worth, thanked House for his beautiful words, saying that they were so inspiring and that Orinda is fortunate to have him as a part of our community. "You are absolutely right that we have a long way to go and much to do," she said, "but I think that the thoughtful conversations and discussions in our community and the actions we can take are really important." Worth praised House as an amazing guy, with incredible experience, courage and grace.

Council Member Darlene Gee said it was lovely to have House at the meeting. Gee and Worth are participating with OUSD board to move forward to improve diversity and inclusion in the city and at the schools. She added that it was inspiring to hear his story and a pleasure to have him share his personal experiences. Council Member Inga Miller agreed that his sharing his stories is just a wonderful thing to do, to keep alive the memories of the people you met with and worked with. House agreed that the kids love to hear to hear him talk about Rosa Parks, who was a good friend of his, and they also love to hear him talk about the time he was arrested for trying to buy an ice cream cone at a Dairy Queen.

House has been featured in a recent book, "Tip of the Arrow," a detailed reflection on the nonviolent movement and events surrounding the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voters Rights Act of 1965. The author, Charles A Bonner, now an attorney in San Francisco, told House that he inspired him when he came to Selma.

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