What Happens to a Dream Deferred?
Langston Hughes, 1951

Success is not final, failure is not fatal: 
It is the courage to continue that counts.
—WINSTON CHURCHILL

My mantra for that day, September 24, 2016, was whatever you do, don’t trip and fall. After eleven years of struggling, believing, convincing others to believe, threading the political needle, and surviving nearly 495 fundraising sojourns, tens of thousands had gathered on the National Mall to bear witness to the opening dedication ceremony of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture. Sitting under the museum’s “porch” on a stage with President and Mrs. Obama, former President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush seated just in front of me, Chief Justice John Roberts, the Chancellor of the Smithsonian across the stage from me, the American icon John Lewis next to me, and an array of senior Smithsonian officials everywhere, I finally let myself accept the enormity of what we had accomplished and what the opening of a museum intended to help America confront its tortured racial past could mean to a nation weary of a divisive presidential campaign, and a country still struggling to define its identity in the twenty-first century. To control my nerves, I forced myself
to take in the crowds, the more than 7,000 VIPs (in other words, their support had earned them chairs) and the multitude who watched the ceremony on Jumbotron from the hillside and from the grounds of the Washington Monument. I realized how much I did not want this moment to end. I did not want to forget a single second because while the success of this endeavor was due to the efforts of hundreds, the vision and the stress of leadership was mine alone.

I was gratified to see an audience more representative of America’s diversity than what one commonly experiences in Washington. The crowd, while well represented by those usually associated with this company town — former President Bill Clinton, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, Nancy Pelosi, Minority leader — also included museum supporters and visitors who just wanted to experience this moment. It felt more like a mini-Obama-like inauguration rather than the celebration of a museum opening. Even the speeches soared to match the significance of the moment. President Bush delivered what I consider to be the best speech of his career, reminding us that slavery was America’s original sin and that a great nation embraces its past rather than hides from its moments of pain or evil.

I was so moved by President Obama who could not conceal his emotions as he framed the African American experience as not a separate or shameful past, but a key part of who we are as Americans. And Congressman John Lewis, standing with the moral authority of someone beaten but not broken during the Civil Rights Movement, as he sought to help a nation bind its racial wounds using the museum as part of the healing balm. What lightened my mood and lessened my fear was listening to Patti LaBelle sing the song I requested, Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come.” Her rendition reminded us that even in the most difficult time, change was possible. Her closing line that the change would be Hillary was embraced by the audience, especially Bill Clinton who leaped from his seat, would ultimately be proven wrong only a few weeks later.

As the “Voice of God” called me to speak, all I could think about was how Congressman Lewis’s feet were blocking my path to the podium. After eleven years, all I could do was pray, please Lonnie, don’t trip because that is all that anyone would remember. I managed to arrive at the podium, and I was choked with emotion and gripped with fear. And, once again, I was overwhelmed when I saw so many people standing, applauding, and calling out my name. At that moment, my thoughts turned to my father and grandfather, both named Lonnie. My grandfather, who began life as a sharecropper on the Perry Plantation outside of Raleigh, North Carolina, had sparked my love of
Lonnie Bunch Sr., grandfather of Lonnie G. Bunch III, who raised his namesake son to become a scientist and a teacher, and inspired his grandson to become a historian. 

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF LONNIE G. BUNCH III
history, and my Dad, a scientist and teacher whose race had limited his career options, had prepared me to be a black man in America. My mind drifted back over the years it had taken me to arrive at this setting. I could never have imagined all the experiences, disappointments, times of great joy, all the visits, and all the people I would encounter. Most importantly, I felt the spirit of my namesakes, the other Lonnie Bunches, because in many ways the crowd was honoring them too, their struggles and their lives, as much as they were recognizing me. I could not believe that the one hundred-year-long journey — and my own eleven-year sojourn — to create a black presence on the National Mall was over.

So many experiences throughout my career had prepared me and positioned me for this, the grandest challenge of my life, what some have labeled my calling. As a young curator at the National Museum of American History, I had been tasked to lead a curatorial team to craft an exhibition that explored America during the nineteenth century. A major element of the exhibition would explore the impact and the legacy of the enslaved. To humanize the experience of slavery, I wanted to focus on a single plantation as a microcosm of the history of the peculiar institution. I traveled throughout the South in search of the perfect subject. I visited sugar plantations in Louisiana and cotton plantations in Alabama and tobacco farms in North Carolina. Eventually, I was taken to the Friendfield estate, a rice plantation outside of Georgetown, South Carolina. There, standing next to a slave cabin extant since the 1840s was Princy Jenkins. In his nineties, Mr. Jenkins had once lived in one of the cabins with his enslaved grandmother.

To tap the knowledge Princy Jenkins had about the life of the enslaved on that plantation was the Holy Grail for a young historian. He told me how the enslaved did a “hard sweep” in the front of the cabin to kill the grass so there would be no vermin near their home. He took me to the rear of the cabin and explained the food that the enslaved grew to supplement the rations they were given. Next we went to one side of the cabin and he spoke about the role children played in monitoring the chimney to alert the adults in case of fires. Then I went to the other side of the cabin, but Mr. Jenkins would not accompany me. I asked him what had happened there and he again refused to come to that side of the cabin. Finally, I implored him to explain, and he just said that he would not come over because there was nothing but rattlesnakes living there. After I stopped running, I asked him why he had not mentioned how dangerous that spot might have been. He replied that people used to remember, now too much is forgotten. He then said words that have shaped my career: if you are a historian then your job better be to

A FOOL’ S ERRAND
help people remember not just what they want to remember, but what they need to remember. Right after he said those words, he shook my hand and left me standing alone by the cabin as he returned to his work as the caretaker of the plantation. I never saw him again and I am sorry that I did not have the foresight to thank him for sharing his wisdom and his history with a stranger from Washington, DC.

The struggle to help reshape America’s memory, to recenter race in the construction of the nation’s identity, and in the words of Mr. Jenkins to remember what America needed to remember, not just what it wanted to recall about the role and impact of African Americans, by creating a place on the National Mall was a century-long battle. From 1915, the idea for a memorial in Washington was initiated by African American veterans of the Civil War whose presence and contributions to the Union victory had not been included in many of the commemorations that accompanied the fiftieth anniversary of the war’s conclusion. At a time when racial segregation was the law of the land, when hundreds of African Americans were lynched and brutalized annually, when the images of blacks in film, in advertising, and in the media were ripe with stereotypes that denigrated and dehumanized, the idea to create a counternarrative was embraced by many in the African American community. It was hoped that this entity would not only honor the patriotism of the African American soldier but would also have a physical space for programs and presentations that would expand America’s knowledge about the black community. Just at this initiative was getting organized the First World War seized the nation’s attention and the monument was never constructed.

During the 1920s, a diverse array of African Americans, including Mary McLeod Bethune, W.E.B Du Bois, Mary Church Terrell, and Kelly Miller, supported the notion of a black presence on the National Mall. A campaign made visible, in part, by the African America press led to the hiring of Harlem architect Eric R. Williams, who created the preliminary design for what was called the National Negro Monument. In 1929, the US Congress would pass Public Law 107, signed by President Calvin Coolidge, that would support the creation of such a building, but it would need massive nonfederal fundraising support, something that the onset of the Great Depression made impossible.

The notion of recognizing the contributions of black Americans gained currency as the nation struggled to change during the post-World War II Civil Rights movement. To many, among them Congressman James Scheuer, a Democrat from New York, the Civil Rights struggle should also broaden
American education to include the presence and contributions of blacks. In 1966, Congress created a commission to study the feasibility of a National Negro History Museum. Though there were concerns raised by the fledgling African American museums and art galleries in numerous urban centers that a national presence may hurt their efforts, many leading African American figures testified in support of this museum — baseball legend Jackie Robinson, Betty Shabazz, widow of Malcolm X, the author James Baldwin, to name only a few. Just as the commission moved forward, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in 1968, and the nation’s gaze turned away from the creation of a cultural institution.

The idea for a national presence lay fallow until the mid-1980s when an African American businessman who created the most successful tour mobile company in the nation’s capital, Tom Mack, contacted Congressman Mickey Leland to campaign for a national museum on the Mall. Soon joined by Civil Rights hero, John Lewis, Leland began to push for legislation that would create a stand-alone black museum. Time and time again, the bills failed to work their way through the legislative process. In the early 1990s, a bill passed the House of Representatives, but was squashed in 1993 when Senator Jesse Helms prevented it from receiving a vote in the Senate. After Leland’s death in 1989, Congressman Lewis, working with a group of Congressional colleagues, introduced legislation that seemed destined to fail every year.

The Smithsonian was always ambivalent about the creation of a national museum that explored the black experience. As early as 1989, the leadership of the Smithsonian in the presence of Secretary Robert McCormick Adams opposed a separate museum and instead proposed that “just a wing” of the National Museum of American History be dedicated to this history. This remark generated a great deal of negative criticism and led the Smithsonian to bring one of the leading African American museum professionals in the nation, Claudine Brown, to assess the Smithsonian’s efforts at interpreting and preserving black culture by conducting a study of the issues involved with creating a museum. Brown brilliantly evaluated the need for this work and explored the challenges to this task, including the limited number of professional people of color at the Institution. After a careful and detailed analysis, Brown encouraged the Smithsonian to create a national museum. Though new leadership arrived at the Smithsonian in 1994 with the appointment of I. Michael Heyman as the tenth Secretary, the Institution still questioned the need for “ethnic” museums on the Mall, but as a concession to the growing interest in a museum in Congress, Brown received the institutional support to create the Center for African American History and
Culture, not as a stand-alone museum but as a unit housed within the aging Arts and Industries Building. This would allow Ms. Brown and her colleagues to enhance and enrich the African American presence on the Mall in ways that the National Museum of American History did not have the staff or the space to accomplish.

In 2001, legislation introduced by John Lewis and Representative J. C. Watts Jr. to create a twenty-three-member Presidential Commission to evaluate issues of location, cost, and collections was enacted and signed by President George W. Bush. Led by Dimensions International CEO Robert Wright and Claudine Brown, the commission released its report strongly advocating for a national museum on April 3, 2003. Six months later in November 2003, legislation crafted by John Lewis, J. C. Watts, Senator Sam Brownback, and Senator Max Cleland, the “National Museum of African American History and Culture Act” (Public Law 108–184) was enacted. Nearly ninety years after the idea was first broached, legislatively, the museum existed. As my father used to say, “patience is a virtue.” But ninety years was a long time to be virtuous.

During the years leading to the passage of the museum legislation, I was blissfully distant. In January 2001, after thirteen years as a curator and later as the Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs at the National Museum of American History, I left Washington to become the President of the Chicago Historical Society (CHS, now the Chicago History Museum), one of the nation’s oldest museums that was venerated but not visited. Leaving the Smithsonian was extremely hard and I had to come to grips with the fact that I would probably never return to the place where my career had begun and flourished. So as I settled into my first job as a museum director I never thought about the National Museum of African American History and Culture — much.

Once the legislation was passed and the Smithsonian was in search of institutional leadership, I was startled by the number of board members of the CHS and university and museum colleagues and friends at the Smithsonian who assumed that the job of founding director was mine or, at least, that I would want to be considered for the position. And during my time at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), I came to realize this job was my calling, but in late 2004 when I was first approached about the possibility I was less than interested. In fact, I turned down the chance to compete several times. There were many factors for my reluctance. The sheer enormity of the task was such a daunting challenge. The charge of conceptualizing and building a national museum,
one potentially on the National Mall, was frightening enough, but even more unsettling was the reality that this was a museum of no: no staff, no site, no architect, no building, no collections, and no money. And it carried the weight and the burden of history. It was both the pressure of fulfilling dreams that had been deferred for nearly a century and the realization that this museum would became the national arbiter and legitimizer of African American culture and history in ways that would overshadow all the years of amazing scholarship emanating from the nation’s universities and colleges. I was not John Hope Franklin, Benjamin Quarles, Letitia Brown, Marion Thompson Wright, Sterling Stuckey, or any of the other pioneering scholars whose work and creativity forced the academic canons to make way for African American history and culture. I did not know if I could create a museum that was worthy of their efforts and talents.

I was also not sure that I was willing to make the personal and professional sacrifices needed to make real the hopes of so many generations. And I was uncertain whether I wanted to spend a decade or more of what could be considered the prime of my career to take on a project that even the most ardent supporters doubted would be realized in their lifetimes. When Hill Hammock, chair of the board of trustees at the CHS, learned that my name was being bandied about, he suggested that it would be better to be the second director of the museum because the burden of being the founding leader would be too great.

There was no denying that the pressure, the visibility, and the risks would be huge. I wrestled with the impact of taking this job would have on my family and my health. If I did return to Washington, it meant that I would have to commute for at least a year. When I left Washington to head the Chicago Historical Society, my oldest daughter was entering her last year in high school and my family had to stay in the area so she could graduate with her class. The family remained and I commuted each week. I hated the commute. The 6 a.m. Monday morning flights. The rush to attend early morning meetings. And the loneliness of coming home to an empty apartment with the only activity of the evening being the choice of which microwavable dinner to blast. I did not fancy having to repeat that experience since my youngest daughter would complete her senior year in high school while I commuted to the Smithsonian. And though I have been labeled a “public historian,” the reality is that I am quite private. I wondered if I wanted or could handle the media scrutiny that would accompany being the face of a museum that did not yet exist. Though at that point I had no idea just how much attention I would attract.
The most important factor in my hesitation was the symbolism of an African American as president of a major cultural institution in a city like Chicago. Throughout my career I have always been critical of a museum profession that was awash in whiteness. The lack of diversity, especially in leadership positions, means that museums have not made the commitment to their communities or to their colleagues to be institutions that grapple with our differences. To see culture, history, and the arts as more than sources of beauty, exoticism, and nostalgia, but to use them as tools that help the audiences navigate the challenges of contemporary America. In an article I wrote twenty years ago, “Flies in the Buttermilk: Museums, Diversity, and the Will to Change,” I challenged the museum profession to train, promote, and hire people of color as leaders of institutions. In Chicago I had the chance to demonstrate how diverse leadership can make an organization better. Our nearly five years of success included increased visitations and visibility, and exhibitions and programs that mattered. And our institution was being seen as a museum valued by an array of communities. I hoped that I had opened doors at other institutions to appreciate and nurture people of color. In essence, my fervent hope was that my work in Chicago would provide greater access to positions of influence and ensure that future generations of diverse scholars and museum professionals would not have to refight the battles I had fought. I worried that taking the helm of what some people felt was another “black museum” would be taking a step back, that I would be retreating from the struggle that had shaped my whole career.

Ultimately, the possibilities and the challenges of creating a national museum proved too alluring to resist. Being president of the Chicago Historical Society nurtured my soul. Yet being part of the birth of the National Museum of African American History and Culture nurtured the souls of my ancestors. Until I returned to the Smithsonian in 2005, I had never written about or mentioned ancestors. But the museum should be about more than an individual’s dream. This endeavor was more important than anything I could ever do. To me success was doing work that would make my ancestors smile. And the opportunity to make them smile was part of what convinced me to pursue this position. I was, however, also moved by the potential to put in place ideas, values, and stories that mattered to me, that were often overlooked. The museum would not be about me, but it would be a laboratory to test and to implement my hopes for what a museum could be in the twenty-first century. I wanted a museum that was a tool to help people find a useful and useable history that would enable them to become better citizens; a museum that would explore and wrestle with issues
of today and tomorrow as well as yesterday. I craved to be part of an institution that was of value both in the traditional ways of curating exhibitions, enriching education opportunities, and preserving collections and in nontraditional ways, such as being a safe space where issues of social justice, fairness, and racial reconciliation are central to the soul of the museum.

To accomplish these goals, a museum must be a welcoming place that is ripe with stories well told. Stories that would allow a museum to humanize and make accessible the past in a manner that was interactive and engaging, that recognized that visitors bring their own histories with them, and that they need to feel that their memories are as valid and as encouraged as the exhibitions a museum would feature. My ideas of interactivity and engagement stemmed not just from an interest in technology, but from the storytelling that I overheard as a boy growing up at our family barbecues in Belleville, New Jersey. Whenever family and friends of my parents gathered, I noticed that the older men eventually settled deep in the backyard so that their laughter-driven stories remained private. I could not wait until I was old enough to join in and learn the secrets of their laughter. I just knew that I would benefit from their wisdom, which for a teenage boy was focused on dating and girls. When I was finally old enough to join the men, I was initially so disappointed. Instead of the secrets of courtship, they were discussing the history of baseball. All that wait for baseball. But as I listened, I became fascinated. First someone would say that Don Newcombe was the best player they had ever seen. But then an uncle would say that no, no one was better than Jackie Robinson. Then a cousin would add “Cool Poppa” Bell into the mix. Soon everyone was sharing an opinion. But the wonder of the conversation was that everyone was engaged and each person’s contribution enriched the discussion and took the gathering in directions unanticipated. I never forgot the sheer joy and wisdom of those occasions. What I wanted was a museum that could replicate the excitement, ownership, and shared learning that came from those conversations, a museum that was not intimidating but as comfortable as the backyard barbecues of my childhood.

What finally convinced me to contend was my hope, my definition of what this museum could be. During the creation of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), I had worked closely with Roger Kennedy, the director of the National Museum of American History, who was quite supportive of the developing NMAI. It was Roger Kennedy who first stirred my imagination about the possibility of becoming a museum director at the Smithsonian. He warned me that to be successful in that role one had to be independent of the Castle—the nineteenth-century building that
housed the leadership of the Smithsonian — and be able to raise one’s own
resources and develop one’s own relationships with members of Congress.
Advice I heeded later in my career.

Through Roger Kennedy I became an ally and supporter of the innova-
tive work of Rick West, the visionary behind the creation of NMAI. He
believed that it was crucial to create a museum that demonstrated that native
people still existed, that they were not extinct. He felt it was essential that
the stories told in the museum service the native community as the primary
audience. Based on the problematic history between native communities,
curators, and museums, this was a logical and reasonable course of action.
But I realized that the patterns established by NMAI would not suit the
NMAAHC. Many potential directors of NMAAHC were speaking out about
the need for this to be the best black museum in the country. I believed the
museum could be much more than that. It should demonstrate that based
on generations of scholarship, the African American story is bigger and
more important to simply be in the hands of one community. In essence, a
new museum should help all who enter or encounter it realize that they are
shaped and informed by the African American experience regardless of who
they are. When I did not see others with such an expansive framework, I felt
I had to weigh in. To my mind, this should be a museum for the next century,
not the last one.

After many conversations with my family about the impact this choice
would have on our time together and the possibility that the stress of this
work could shorten my life, I decided that I would seek the job as the Found-
ing Director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.
Making this decision took almost as long as the interview process. From the
fall of 2004 until February of 2005, I drafted written responses to an array of
questions, including what was my vision for the museum, what was my man-
gagement experience, how familiar was I with the political arena, what success
had I in fundraising, and where did I hope the museum would be in ten years?
I found these questions quite useful as they helped me to draft a preliminary
sense of the vision and the strategy that would be my guiding document once I
secured the position and began my tenure back at the Smithsonian.

The interview process proved to be much more challenging. I remem-
ber flying to Washington and being ushered into the conference room of
Sheila Burke, the deputy secretary (the number two person) of the Smith-
sonian Institution. While I had known Sheila prior to my leaving NMAH
for Chicago, she greeted me with reserve, not like a former colleague. I
thought this might not bode well. I sat at the head of a very long table that

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seemed too big for the room. It might have seemed so large because there were at least twelve people squeezed around the table poised to ask questions in a rapid-fire manner. The search committee included representatives of the Presidential Commission, scholars such as Deborah Mack, formerly of the Field Museum in Chicago, and Charles Ogletree Jr. of the Harvard Law School whose prize pupil, Barack Obama, would soon be running for the US Senate; prominent individuals with influence within the African American community such as Lerone Bennett Jr. of Ebony magazine; and senior officials from the Smithsonian such as James Early. The questions came from all sides of the table, but most focused on my time in Chicago as a museum director and my interest in and ability to raise funds. Obviously, there were questions about my vision for the museum. I expected more probing about my own scholarship and my sense of how one builds a national collection. I must admit, as a former college professor, I enjoyed the banter and the challenge of being nimble. I felt good about the interview, but in hindsight I worried that I may have stumbled over questions about working with Congress and about my own relations with the moneyed elite.

I was more troubled when I realized that the other finalist was Claudine Brown, someone whose work and vision I so admired. I was less anxious about the competition and more concerned about what the job might mean to her. After all, she had devoted years to this endeavor, first as an analyst of what was possible at the Smithsonian, then as the leader of the Center for African American History and Culture, and finally as the co-chair of the Presidential Commission who had toiled for years to analyze the potentiality of a stand-alone museum on the Mall. I was more upset at the prospect that I might lose a friend and a valued colleague than I was of losing a job. There were very few African Americans at the highest levels of the museum profession. People such as Amina Dickerson, John Fleming, Juanita Moore, Spencer Crew, Howard Dodson, and Claudine were my peers, my support group, and my friends. I hoped that this process would not cause a rift. Earlier in my career I had actually withdrawn from a job search because I did not want to compete with a friend. This time would be different. Later, when I was asked to return to speak with Secretary Lawrence Small, I thought that I might be offered the job. Even before I celebrated with my family, I wanted to reach out and talk with Claudine, but I did not know what to say. It would be several years before we could share the experience and rebuild our friendship. I am most grateful that we spent time together once she returned to the Smithsonian as the Assistant Secretary of Education and Access before her all too early death in 2016.
I had hoped that my interviews were strong enough to induce Secretary Small to hire me, but I was still surprised when he offered me the position. Candidly, I was stunned. During the last year of my tenure at NMAH, which was his first year at the Smithsonian, we had a problematic relationship. In my mind, he was brought to the Smithsonian, from corporate America, to increase its fundraising profile and to bring a sense of order to what he once called “undisciplined and out of control curators,” of which I was proud to be one. My first interaction with the Secretary occurred when he wanted to address the curatorial staff at NMAH, which was my unit. After expressing his excitement at some of the wonderful collections of the Smithsonian, he then made clear the limits of academic freedom at the Institution. He suggested that a curator’s interests must always be subordinated to the institutional priorities. In essence, he proclaimed a new day at the Smithsonian. Later that day I shared with him that his talk did not go over well and that I believed there could be a balance between individual scholarly pursuits and the needs of the Institution. We agreed to disagree, though it was clear who had the power.

During his walk-through of the museum, he commented on the presence of an exhibition that chronicled the history of the First Ladies, but noted that we had nothing as substantive on the presidency. He later ordered that the museum create an exhibition that explored the story of the presidents and that we needed to open it by the next presidential inauguration, which was in less than a year. Being told what to do by the central administration and to curate an exhibition in less than a year created a great deal of what we called in my New Jersey neighborhood, agita. Yet, I realized he was right. We did need such an exhibition and if we were as good as the public thought we should be able to do something within that time frame. So, in concert with NMAH Director Spencer Crew and Curator of Political History Harry Rubenstein, I took the lead in curating a major exhibition, The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden. It was my task to be the intermediary with the Secretary. We had many moments of disagreement and what diplomats called “frank and candid discussions.” We debated everything from some of the interpretive frameworks to the color of the carpets. Ultimately, we worked together and the exhibition opened in November 2000, just prior to the inauguration of President George W. Bush.

I thought that our previous interactions might disqualify me in his mind, so I was pleased but quizzical when Secretary Small asked me to return to the Smithsonian as the director of a paper museum. Before I gave him my answer, I wanted him to know that I was the same person with whom he had
previously had a strained relationship. And that being a museum director in Chicago had only sharpened some of my political and curatorial edges. He responded by recalling a debate we had had over the racial content of one of the many videos within the American Presidency exhibition. On the occasion he was worried that I would be unreasonable and demand that the contested racial content be untouched. He said that he was pleasantly surprised when I agreed to edit the piece so that we could both be satisfied with the content. While I did not remember the episode, I understood that he knew that I would stand my ground, especially over issues of race, but that I was also reasonable, whatever that meant.

Once we reached an agreement about my employment, I made small talk by asking about his family, which prompted me to begin to mention my children, at which point he abruptly cut me off, saying that he did not want to know too much about me in case he had to fire me. Talk about deflating one’s confidence. I had not yet even started and he was contemplating my replacement. Some welcome home.

I returned to Chicago and began the process of transitioning back to Washington. I was offered the position in March 2005, but I could not begin to lead this fledgling effort until July. The Chicago Historical Society was in the process of creating an exhibition that commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of Emmett Till by exploring the history of racial violence in America. This work was so important to me: it helped the museum embrace challenging histories and it allowed me to honor Mamie Till Mobley, the mother of the slain child whose actions forced America to look at itself and helped to reignite the Civil Rights Movement. I did not realize it at the time but Mrs. Mobley’s actions and friendship would play a key role in many of the decisions I would make as director of NMAAH. Since I could not leave in the middle of such an endeavor, the Smithsonian agreed not to release the news of my hire until later in the spring.

In light of how much my life was changing, my wife, Maria, and I decided to take a brief holiday with friends to a beach resort in Mexico. Before I could even walk on the beach, I received an anxious call from the Office of Public Affairs at the Smithsonian: someone had leaked my appointment, and both the Washington Post and the New York Times, and several other media outlets, were set to run articles. And the Smithsonian wanted me to be interviewed. This was the first of many missteps. I had not shared the news of my departure with my staff and now they would learn about my abandoning them from the press with me out of the country. This would be a true embarrassment because many of the museum’s donors and my supporters would not learn of
my departure in the way I had hoped. The resolution: I spent hours trapped in an expensive hotel room, only being able to glance at the ocean, while talking to a plethora of journalists about plans I had not developed and dreams I was not close to realizing.

After arriving back at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport, we made our way to our home in Oak Park. Though Ernest Hemingway apocryphally said that Oak Park was a place of wide lawns and narrow minds, we loved living in that community. As we pulled into the driveway, I noticed piles of packages on the front steps. Looking at the material, I realized that nearly a dozen architectural firms had sent information to me about their interest in designing the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Between the attention from the press and now from the design community, I gradually began to understand that this new journey would be unlike anything I had ever experienced. What I found more frightening was the fact that there were few models in history that I could draw upon where people had embarked on such a “fool’s errand” as I now had.