



Candles, song warm city streets

World-renowned musicians help raise awareness of historic African Burying Ground project

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PORTSMOUTH — The joyous strains of Africa could be heard across a chilly, starlit night in Portsmouth as hundreds of people swayed and laughed and held candles high, leaving The Music Hall on Monday night and congregating across the street at the “sacred” African Burying Ground.

They came from a warm and vibrant sold-out concert by the Soweto Gospel Choir, whose infectious gospel and traditional Zulu and American songs brought the entire house to its feet.

It was a concert made possible by a collaboration

between The Music Hall and the African Burying Ground Committee, as a way to bring the music of South Africa to the city of Portsmouth and, in so doing, raise awareness of the burying ground, where 200 or more slaves and freed Africans are believed to be buried.

“I think it’s the most significant thing that’s happened since the project started,” said committee Chairwoman Vernis Jackson of the choir’s visit.

Not only did the choir perform at The Music Hall, members were guests of honor at a reception at the Seacoast African American Cultural Center on Monday afternoon. That evening, before the concert,

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KRISTEN PHELPS PHOTOS

TOP: Hundreds gathered in the city’s downtown Monday night, during an event to raise awareness of the historic African Burying Ground memorial project. **MIDDLE:** Spectators on Chestnut Street, including Vernis Jackson, front, share a solemn moment. **ABOVE:** Drummers lead the way to the burial ground after the Soweto Gospel Choir’s sold-out performance at The Music Hall.

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they also performed at The Music Hall Loft at a fund-raiser for the memorial that will be built on Chestnut Street.

And each of the events, said committee member Janet Prince, did just a little bit more to raise awareness of the burying ground.

"We've known from the beginning that we just need to educate people about this history. Once they know, they understand," she said.

Prince said she heard some-

one talking about the fact that, one day, this country will not have to celebrate black history month because "black history will be woven into our collective history. We're not there yet, but hopefully we can come to appreciate the lives that were forgotten here and come together as a community to honor them."

Prince spoke at the site of the burying ground, to which concert-goers were led by world musician Randy Armstrong and his Ghanaian friends Saled Abbas and Theo

Martey, all three playing West African drums.

It was, said Armstrong, an honor to be asked to perform as part of the evening's celebration.

"The concert was stunning and it was a thrill to be part of it," he said. "For us, this was a historic event."

Attorney John Bosen, whose office is on Chestnut Street, has already committed a pledge to the burial ground memorial.

"We have an obligation to the people who are buried beneath this street," he said.