

# CELEBRATING AFRICAN AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

## Dr. Ethel Pitts Walker Educator, Activist, and Cultural Icon

**Cultural Heritage Center - 5th floor • February 1-28, 2014**



A celebration of a 49-year career as a teacher, scholar, and activist - 24 of those here at San José State University - this exhibit takes you into the life of Dr. Walker who is deeply rooted in faith, family and community.

*"The job of a teacher is to inspire the students, to get them to care about life, take chances and get out of their environment and into the world and help make it better." - Dr. Ethel Walker*



This exhibition was made possible by Dr. Ethel Pitts Walker and Phillip Walker.



Sponsored by the SJSU African American Faculty & Staff Association and the Africana Advisory Committee, Cultural Heritage Center, MLK Library, SJSU



## THE SOIL AND THE TEACHER

On a recent winter afternoon, Dr. Ethel Louise Pitts Walker gently caressed a jar of ancestral soil, part of an exhibition saluting her 49-year illustrious career as a teacher, scholar and activist. This sacred earth, she said holding back tears, “is soil from a people who couldn’t read or write.”

Surveying the cases filled with personal effects, she said softly, “all of this is so humbling.”

From the blackened soil beneath the Tennessee plantation home of her ancestors - slaves Sarah and William Bailey - the lineage of Dr. Walker was first shaped and then carefully sculpted.

Deeply rooted in faith and family through her childhood and adolescence, a community of folks who valued education from her Tulsa, OK, birthplace, to the teachers at the segregated Booker T. Washington High School and later at historically black Lincoln University, MO, all saw that this only child of Wilhelmina Miller and Opie D. Pitts, Sr., would blossom.

This community of nurturing, praying folks had faith and belief that with *the wind beneath her wings* – this young woman would one day fly.

This exhibition gently peels back the layers of a remarkable teacher. It tugs at the heartstrings. Here you see and feel the inspiration from Dr. Walker’s many professional mentors, Ed Bullins, James Baldwin, George Wolfe, Lorraine Hansberry, Thomas D. Pawley, III and Lynn Nottage, to name a few. In these cases one also gets a glimpse at the causes Dr. Walker holds dear and the unconditional love and support of her family – a devoted husband, son and granddaughter.

To the visitors of this exhibition, some advice: Take your time. Soak it all in. Laugh. Reflect. Tear-up. It’s O.K.

Examine the playbills, posters and academic research she compiled during her 24 years as a theatre professor at San Jose State University. Read the newspaper headlines; see her in action on the front line of activism believing that *the time is always right to do right*. Then pause and read the touching salutation from a former student.

For in the end, Dr. Walker’s believes, it’s always been about teaching and touching the lives of her students.

“The job of a teacher is to inspire the students,” Dr. Walker said, “to get them to care about life, take chances and get out of their environment and into the world and help make it better.”

Lastly, a salutation from James Baldwin seated in a cozy *Corner* at his favorite Paris café – *Amen!*

-D. Michael Cheers, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor, School of Journalism and Mass Communications, SJSU

This exhibition is curated by Kathryn Blackmer Reyes, Librarian and Director of the Cultural Heritage Center, MLK Library, SJSU