



The entrance to the modern Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn's Crown Heights opens to the green space and historic homes of the original community beyond.

IN THE YEARS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR, A RARE COMMUNITY established itself in a rural part of Brooklyn, a few miles east of lower Manhattan. A village of some 500 freed Black people, including former slaves and those seeking refuge, had sprung up on land purchased in 1838 by Black longshoreman James Weeks. Stores, farms, schools, a hospital, a home for the aged, an orphanage and many other services, all owned and run by Black men and women, dotted the small town known as Weeksville.

More than a community, the town was a symbol of what Black prosperity could be, and a refuge from the horrific violence, fear and discrimination that characterized the Black experience in most of the US. In 1863, for example, during the Civil War, white New York City workers outraged by the US Army's conscription practices staged four days of riots. Free Black men, excluded from the draft and seen as a threat to white jobs, became targets of the

mob violence. Thousands left the city; many for the safety of Weeksville.

The town thrived into the '30s, when it was largely erased by the development of the Brooklyn neighborhoods Bedford Stuyvesant and Crown Heights.

Today Dr. Raymond Codrington is President and CEO of the Weeksville Heritage Center, a small campus around four remaining homes that also includes a large green space and a main community center building constructed in 2014. A cultural anthropologist with a distinguished career of more than two decades, he was selected to lead Weeksville in 2020, in the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

His appointment came at another critical juncture: The organization in 2019 had been granted Cultural Institutions Group status in New York City, a significant recognition of its ongoing contribution to the history and life of the city. Weeksville is the first in over 20 years to be added to New York's

Invoking the ANCESTORS



Cultural Institutions Group, which includes such stalwarts as the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Brooklyn Botanic Garden. And it is the first Black institution in Brooklyn to make the CIG list.

As part of a leading global city, CIG institutions shape the cultural life of the world more broadly. Some have existed for over a century and have developed global reputations and accumulated resources across many generations.

“It’s important for an institution like Weeksville to be in that kind of cohort, as an institution that’s the outcome of a free Black community—a historic site that’s Black,” Dr. Codrington said in an interview with the *Brunswick Review*. “I think it changes the conversation. We’re focused on community in a different way. To be in conversation with those institutions at the city level I think is very important for the overall cultural fabric and cultural conversation in the city itself.”

The 19th century free Black town of Weeksville, in Brooklyn, speaks to New York City’s past, present and future, says the site’s President and CEO **DR. RAYMOND CODRINGTON**. By **CHANEL CARAWAY** and **CARLTON WILKINSON**.

Despite its historic importance, Weeksville almost vanished completely. Pratt Institute researchers rediscovered the remaining structures in 1968. Joan Maynard, a local resident and community organizer, began a vigorous campaign to restore and preserve the homes, resulting in historic landmark status in the early ’70s. Maynard founded the Society for the Preservation of Weeksville and Bedford Stuyvesant History, which purchased the homes in 1973 and opened the Weeksville Heritage Center in 2005.

The Center’s main building was built in 2014 and contains offices, a gallery and a multipurpose space overlooking its own large outdoor park, which doubles as a performance and arts presenting area. The Weeksville houses are a short walk away, following a trail through the green space historically known as Hunterfly Road.

Dr. Codrington has made a career of finding patterns in the community that illustrate the larger cultural networks of the Black diaspora, working as a cultural anthropologist in community organizations in Chicago, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh before coming to New York. Born in the UK to Jamaican immigrant parents and raised in Texas, he sees those same patterns in his own life.

At Weeksville, Dr. Codrington says he has “come full circle,” returning to the community studies that give the Center an evolving relevance and vitality, while exploring what the journey means for him personally.

In your words, what is Weeksville?

Weeksville is a place. It’s an idea. Weeksville started as a freed Black community, the second largest freed Black community in the pre-Civil War era. Weeksville is what happens when free Blacks were able to build a community unencumbered by racism.

When events like the Draft Riots of 1863 happened, Blacks from Manhattan came to Weeksville. When the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 happened, Black people came to Weeksville for refuge. So it’s always had an ethos of independence, self-sufficiency and safety. You actually had to travel here by horse, or horse and buggy or carriage. It wasn’t impossible, but it wasn’t the easiest to get to. So you have a space where you’re able to set up or establish a community.

To have the remnants of a freed Black community in an urban area—in the middle of Brooklyn—it’s a big deal. There’s an intangible quality and energy here that I haven’t felt in many places. People often invoke the ancestors. I was never quick to do that. But they’re here. And I feel like people get some of that when they get here.

Your first year as CEO was not a normal year for anyone because of the pandemic. How did you handle that?

You're trying to motivate staff, you're trying to produce work and you're constantly looking at the infection rates. Your calculus is, "When do we stay open? When do we stay closed? What is the city mandate around mask wearing? How do we enforce this? When do we enforce this? What are our capacity numbers?"

So there's that, the sort of general mechanics of opening/closing, remote or in person. But then, when you're new, you have your own ideas about what you think the vision should be. We're really internally thinking about our community. Who is our audience? How do we engage social justice? How do we make the historic Weeksville story relevant to today?

As an anthropologist, I love it. I mean, it brings together pretty much all the work that I've done before—qualitative research, talking to people, trying to figure out what are the cultural and social dynamics of this neighborhood. I did six years at the Aspen Institute working at a policy program called the Round Table on Community Change, whose primary work was facilitating and training senior leaders in cross-sector environments on how to address and dismantle structural racism within their spheres of influence. And I love that here we have the houses, we have collections.

Part of the appeal for me here is that the work is iterative. You never get to spike the football and say, "We got it. It's all good. We know exactly what we're doing." Weeksville can be a lab for that kind of work to really think about the role of cultural institutions in cities and neighborhoods.

Here, the community is all around us, but then also broader Brooklyn, the city and the country. So as a cultural anthropologist, my "spidey senses" are going off, registering, peaking constantly. It's a great space to be in.

The reckoning that we've seen around social and racial justice issues over the last few years—these concerns are at the core of Weeksville. Does that provide you with an opening for a broader scale for your message?

I think so. I hope it's not just a moment. I hope that notions around social justice and racial equity stay on the radar of institutions, but also society in general. I feel like a lot of institutions had their George Floyd moment, did a series of programs, and now they're gone. For us, people are calling for increased accountability, because of our history. It did have an



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impact for some of our funding; it was more available. I feel like that window is starting to kind of close a little bit. But the question around racial justice, equity and social justice remains with us.

We've tried to address it through programming, trying to expand our audience. There's a racial justice question, and then there's a broader equity and access question. So really thinking about who our audience is—that might be LGBTQIA for instance, that's also in the mix alongside racial justice. Those are all connected.

Can you tell us about some of the programming that you do at Weeksville? What's most satisfying for you?

I like the house tours. It's just really interesting to see young people's reaction to the story of Weeksville and for a tour educator to make the connection with what's going on now. We're thinking too about ways that we can bring in this green space and make the connection to the building to really give a 360° view of Weeksville as a site, as a historic community, but also as a cultural institution and contemporary cultural institution.

About two months ago, we had an online discussion about the impact of COVID-19 on the community—a very specific and hyper-local framing of the discussion. That is a space where I see our work growing, those kinds of conversations.

The artist-in-residence program has been good. I'm also excited about our new curator-in-residence program. We have two curator residencies lined up. The first one is in September. There is a gallery space, but the thing about Weeksville is that all of this is presentation space. There's an empty house where you can present work. There's the green space. There's the gallery in the hallways.

We're also really trying to think about what are ways in which we can use technology for both onsite and offsite experiences. People are experiencing culture through devices. Not everybody will be able to come onsite. So this just allows us to tell our story in a broader way.

Does any tension arise between the types of exhibits or performances people want to present and the basic mission of Weeksville?

I think there's a healthy tension. I'm interested in merging what we've done historically and thinking about potential new directions that can focus on different types of Black and diasporic experiences. What are versions of Blackness that maybe we haven't thought about? But at the same time, you

don't want to move too far away from the programs that people historically associate with Weeksville.

We've been trying the last couple years to grow this idea about having a green market at Weeksville. That feels like something that's gone on historically at Weeksville. But there are also ways that we can scale that up, build out our vendors. We're in a food desert. So there's a very practical reason why there would be a green market here.

It kicks off on Juneteenth with a food festival that we've partnered with a community-focused organization called Black Owned Brooklyn. Those kinds of partnerships are very exciting to me, where we're bringing in local vendors, local businesses to Weeksville and really showing people that any number of businesses have been opened in Brooklyn and Crown Heights.

So yes, as an institution, you're always trying to figure out, "How do we remain relevant? What's our relevancy?" And then, "How do we leverage what we've done in the past?" Those are questions that if you're not asking yourself as an institution, you should be.

What made you decide to be a cultural anthropologist?

My parents are Jamaican immigrants. They moved to England in 1957 and then I moved with my mother to Galveston. So going back and forth between the US, the UK and Jamaica, I was just implicitly aware of the movement of people based on labor, the way in which culture is produced, the way in which culture operates in different countries. I'm a different person in Jamaica. I'm perceived differently from how I am in England and how I am in the States—these various versions of Blackness.

I studied government as an undergrad. I had some electives, so I started taking anthropology courses on African American culture and the Black diaspora. And everything they were talking about, I was either experiencing it or my family had experienced it. So, anthropology became a way to deconstruct and construct Black culture and Blackness.

I started at the Field Museum. We were a cluster of cultural anthropologists that were working at a place called The Center for Cultural Understanding and Change that was doing ethnographic, qualitative research in Chicago. We weren't artifact based. We weren't archaeologists. We were the people actually going out and talking to people, and getting their perspectives on culture in Chicago, how culture is

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being adaptive, how culture helps you deal with whatever you're going through.

So now this place feels like a good fit—a place that draws together your personal and professional experiences in the way that Weeksville does for me. I feel like it was the right move.

You've said that people need to be here to experience it. With COVID, how are you getting people in the door?

It's been challenging. Part of it is better marketing. Part of it is diversifying the programming—you can do small things, like reading circles online, or you can do big festivals—and going between the small- and larger-scale events, working with different kinds of partners so that you're leveraging their audiences as well.

An event like the Juneteenth food festival, partnering with Black Brooklyn, really expands the range of people that know about Weeksville and will see it not only as an exhibit space, but also a place that has a green market, a place that has interest in sustainability, a place with interest in the food.

So it's really about diversification—diversification of the programming, but also services. A lot of the COVID work was around that.

Are there lessons here for other cities where Black history has been overlooked or erased?

At Weeksville, you're not only talking about the importance of history, but you're preserving history. I think for many Black communities or Black spaces, it's hard to do historic preservation—it's labor intensive, time heavy, a lot of bureaucracy. You have to get the right parties interested, galvanized. You have to have the time to make it a movement.

It makes it more of a resource and a destination. It's something that people can see, and go to, and point to, and say, "That is us. That's our history. And it's still here." And it also represents a certain kind of political will—and in Weeksville's case, a community will—to preserve that history and have that rich history told and retold.

But it took work. It took Shirley Chisholm being involved. It took a community effort. It took everybody from Boy Scouts, to elected officials at the local, state and federal levels. Joan Maynard did a yeoman's work getting the houses landmarked and really building the movement around Weeksville, helping people understand the importance of Black history and telling the history. But you can never say it's just one person. ♦