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Moscow, Potlatch men honored for work preserving history

By Kali Nelson, Daily News staff writer
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Freeman Jr.



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A pair of Latah County residents will be among the one dozen people statewide to receive 2023 Esto Perpetua Awards on Monday in Boise for their work promoting Idaho history.

Sydney Freeman Jr., of Moscow, and Gary Strong, of Potlatch, each will be honored by the Idaho State Historical Society.

Freeman Jr., director of the University of Idaho Black History Research Lab and professor in the UI College of Education, Health and Human Sciences, will be honored for his work with the lab, established in 2021 and focused on sharing the stories of Black students at the university.

“It represents the importance of Blacks, not only to the University of Idaho but the state as a whole,” Freeman Jr. said.

In February, Freeman Jr. and lab manager Brody Gasper wrote and published “The Seminal History Prospective Future of Blacks at the University of Idaho.” The book covers Black history and celebrations in Moscow and the UI from the 19th Century to today.

“It’s important we lift up and honor Black History wherever it may be,” Freeman Jr. said.

The award was a surprise to Freeman Jr., who said he was honored to be recognized for the work. It was a collaborative effort to create the lab and to get the book published, he said, and it would not have been done without the assistance of the UI College of Education, Health and Human Sciences, the Office of the President, the history department and the UI Library. Freeman Jr., also said the Black Student Union and its incoming president, Rim Tekle, were important in making the lab’s programs successful.

“While my name is being honored, I would like to thank those entities,” Freeman Jr. said.

Strong has worked with the Potlatch Historical Society and the Washington, Idaho and Montana Railway Historic Preservation group after his retirement in 2013. He serves on the library advisory board for the UI and has made significant contributions to the university’s special collections about Potlatch history.

He graduated from UI with a degree in education in 1966 before receiving a master’s degree in library science from the University of Michigan. He received an honorary doctorate from UI in 2010 and was named an outstanding alumni in 1994.

Strong worked at libraries across the country during his 53-year career. He was the director of the Queens Borough Public Library of New York, a consultant and advisor for the Library of Congress and served 14 years as the state librarian of California. He retired from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2013 where he was the university librarian.

Latah County remained a special place for him in his travels and said it felt like coming home when he and his wife retired and moved back. It was after getting settled that Strong started looking for ways to preserve the history in north Latah County and make it accessible to everyone.

Strong is working with the University of Idaho to digitize the Potlatch and railroad collections for greater access to the public.

He plans to be in Boise to receive his award before returning to Potlatch following a visit to his grandchildren.

“I really enjoy working with the community,” Strong said.

Nelson can be reached at knelson@dnews.com.