Lonnie G. Bunch III is experiencing a watershed moment. On an unseasonably mild February day in the nation’s capital, he stands at the podium in a stadium-size tent on the National Mall addressing an audience of 600 business and political leaders, a group that includes the president of the United States and the first lady.

Bunch delivers his speech amid the momentous groundbreaking of the Smithsonian Institution’s $500 million National Museum of African American History and Culture—which has been six years in the making. “Today, we begin to make manifest on this Mall, on this sacred space, the dreams of many generations who fought for and believe there should be a site in the nation’s capital that will help all Americans remember and honor African American history and culture,” the 59-year-old founding director states. “But equally important to this vision was the need to make better all who visit the National Museum, by using African American culture as a lens to more clearly understand what it means to be an American.”

The NMAAHC is arguably the largest philanthropic effort in history driven by African Americans, complete with a five-star advisory council that includes former Citigroup Chairman Richard D. Parsons, American Express CEO Kenneth I. Chenault, media mogul Oprah Winfrey, billionaire dealmaker Robert L. Johnson, and former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. Bunch’s mission includes raising $250 million in donations from corporations, foundations, and individuals—which the NMAAHC is already closing in on—and mining the world for artifacts that will represent the “wide arc of history—slavery, Reconstruction, the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migrations to the North and West, segregation, the civil rights movement and beyond, including issues of the 21st century.”

When the five-acre institution adjacent to the Washington Monument opens in 2015, it will exhibit a varied collection spanning 400 years of African American history. Items collected for display include slave shackles, tintypes of black Union Army soldiers, lunch counters from civil
rights sit-ins, and the mother ship of the legendary funk band Parliament-Funkadelic. To accomplish this audacious goal, Bunch has undergone a transformation from noted scholar and historian to hard-charging entrepreneur with organizational dexterity and salesman chops.

Whether large or small, organizations need managers like Bunch to run campaigns in an environment in which philanthropic dollars are spandex tight. It’s true that charitable donations have started to rebound after the Great Recession: A 2011 Giving USA report revealed that contributions to the arts declined 1.8% between 2008 and 2009, but rose an estimated 5.7% in 2010. But competition remains fierce. Susan Taylor Batten, president and CEO of the Association of Black Foundation Executives, says nonprofits must flawlessly execute their strategic plan and connect with donors. She says, “Cultivation is the key. Fundraising lesson 101 is that people like to give money to people they know. You have to help people see that causes that look as if they’re very focused on black communities are ultimately contributing to the common good. And foundations like to invest in large efforts that have scale, so it’s important to reveal your partnerships and strategic connections.”

The NMAAHC offers an inventive model for nonprofits to follow. After Rep. John Lewis, the legendary activist that represents Atlanta’s 5th District, lobbied more than 12 years to secure its authorization, President George W. Bush signed legislation in 2003 to establish the 19th museum within the Smithsonian complex. Congress committed $250 million over 10 years, so Bunch must make regular trips to Capitol Hill to sway legislators to provide funding for the institution’s annual budget. The NMAAHC team has had to raise the other $250 million through private donations.

Here’s how Bunch developed the museum.

**Make the vision real**
If you spend any time at NMAAHC headquarters, you’ll find among the slew of memorabilia, several large sheets of yellow flipchart paper taped on a wall in the office’s glass-encased conference room. Representing Bunch’s thinking process and his “2 a.m. conversations,” they outline development plans for the museum from 2009 to opening day in 2015. He wasn’t guided by “a lot of management theory, but by all our ancestors. I find myself saying, ‘How would Frederick Douglass or Sojourner Truth handle the opportunity to do something that can transform a nation?’ I come from a culture that’s accomplished amazing things, and it gives me confidence to move forward and do this job.”

Bunch isn’t new to the Smithsonian—he’s worked there off and on for 20 years. Before serving as head of the Chicago Historical Society (now the Chicago History Museum), he was associate
director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Still, when offered the job of leading the NMAAHC, he turned it down. The top brass lured him back by cleverly asking him to develop a document detailing the type of institution he would create if he were leading it. He reflects: “I spent three months just thinking about what this museum could be before I came back here. I [would write on] yellow pads of paper and put on the walls, ‘Vision … what makes this a 21st-century museum?’ And then, ‘What makes it a Smithsonian museum?’ I basically laid out a series of questions and began to fill up the sheets to come up with the vision.”

He realized millions would walk through the museum and sought to establish “a pilgrimage place for African Americans” and an accessible vehicle for international visitors. “It’s a great opportunity to change the way people think,” he asserts.

He initially focused on an overarching, 10-year plan, but scrapped the idea after talking with then-Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, who told him, “Why do you want to go back [to Washington] and run a project? People don’t care about projects.” Bunch decided that “rather than plan for and build a museum, my job is to make the museum exist from the day I started … to be up and running now to show people … to show funders … to show the public … here’s the kind of educational opportunities you have.”

It was a novel approach, enabling Bunch to tap leading curators, authenticators, and historians to develop exhibits and write books. Next, he secured gallery space to open an exhibit of black photography in 2006. “When we opened the gallery, Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton stood up and said, ‘I can’t believe there are 700 people at an opening for a museum that doesn’t exist.’ It allowed me to get donors right away.” Moreover, he found that technology would be critical to reach a 21st-century audience. So the old-school historian hired what he calls “digital natives” to create a virtual museum featuring readily accessible historical content.

As he refined his vision to kick-start fundraising and public engagement, he also oversaw the body that would select the museum’s architects. “I was asked more than any other question: ‘What’s the building going to look like?’ It was a fool’s errand to try to define what it would look like. I had to define what it should feel like … resilience and optimism, spirituality and uplift.”

Bunch and company ensured that the bidding process would be transparent through an international competition that included some 50 firms. It took months for the jury to choose the triumvirate of versatile designers: Max Bond, the distinguished African American architect who died in 2009; Philip Freelon, an African American architect known for innovative designs of libraries and museums; and David Adjaye, a British Ghanaian architect whose firm has designed eclectic structures in London, Berlin, and Moscow. “Everybody else focused on the trauma of the African American experience, the hardship,” says Adjaye. “We came in and said, ‘This is not a story just about trauma, it’s actually a story about celebration and extraordinary achievement in the face of adversity.’”

In the end, this was the team that captured Bunch’s vision.
**Tap the resources of a powerful board**

In June 2005, Bunch had to contend with an intimidating meeting at NMAAHC, a month before he officially took the helm. “I walk into my first board meeting. I’m looking for my name, and I am between Oprah Winfrey and Dick Parsons,” he reflects.

Bunch knew that this advisory council—co-chaired by Parsons and Linda Johnson Rice, chairman of Johnson Publishing Co., publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines—was composed of some of the nation’s most powerful people who have vast strategic knowledge and virtually unlimited resources, enviable global contacts and, most important, a burning desire to erect a monument to black achievement. Sixteen of the 24-member advisory council are African American, many of whom are among the NMAAHC’s largest contributors: Parsons, Bob Johnson, former Fannie Mae CEO Franklin Raines, Johnson Publishing, and the Oprah Winfrey Foundation have all contributed $1 million or more.

Chenault’s American Express has given $5 million, and other African American council members Anthony Welters, executive vice president of UnitedHealth Group, and Allan Golston, president of U.S. Programs for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, helped guide their organizations’ investments of $5 million and $10 million, respectively. “We have and will continue to use our collective and individual resources to gain major corporate contributions,” says Parsons.

Bunch says the council’s immeasurable value was giving the museum instant credibility. “You had to show that the major players cared about this, and because there would have to be so much private fundraising, which is more than we’ve traditionally done at the Smithsonian, the decision was to make sure the board had a strong corporate leadership,” says Bunch. “The most amazing thing is [I told] all those folks that I need them for the whole decade, and they stayed. Everybody realized how important this is.”

The advisory council weighs in on every strategic decision involving the museum’s development and management. The NMAAHC’s leash was shorter than that of most nonprofits because the museum operates under government oversight as part of the Smithsonian complex. The team had a playbook, a set of principles and policies that had been developed by the founding presidential commission. It was up to Bunch to call the plays, though. “I learned you’ve got to have confidence in your vision, but be smart enough to let other people help shape it,” he says.

So it was important for Bunch to utilize its members’ expertise for a range of initiatives and challenges. For instance, he routinely consults with Raines and Johnson on how to tackle congressional issues. He’s tapped Ann Fudge, former chairman and CEO of Y&R Advertising, to help map out a plan to increase visibility. He’s discussed educational issues with UNCF CEO Michael Lomax. And to design and upgrade the virtual museum, he accessed critical human and technical resources through IBM Chairman Samuel J. Palmisano. Bunch says the board “provided strategic support, but they were also an umbrella. They allowed me to focus on what I needed to focus.”

Since 2006, the operation has grown from a two-person shop with a budget of $2 million to a staff of 73 and a budget of $13.5 million today.
**Become a Super Salesman**

One of Bunch’s strengths is his ability to sell the mission, whether conferring with congressmen on the Hill, talking to CEOs in the executive suite, or chatting up a group of senior citizens at a community center. Delphia Duckens, associate director of external affairs for NMAAHC, who has coordinated fundraising efforts for the past 15 months, asserts that “Lonnie is one of the best in terms of articulating the vision in a way that people see themselves wanting to be a part of it. In this business we say you’ve got to make them cry three times. Very few CEOs or directors I’ve worked with can connect with people on the emotional level, and that’s what makes people write checks.” Lilly Endowment Inc. has contributed $10 million, and the Houston Endowment donated $500,000. Part of the reason for such success has been Bunch’s ability to forge local partnerships with museums and historical societies. He also makes a convincing case for broad geographic representation.

Duckens says the NMAAHC approaches fundraising from a “standpoint of abundance, not scarcity,” not wasting much time on those who will suffer from sticker shock. “I know we’re competing with [other] things, but donors who have an interest in the arts and culture are going to give to an organization where their passions lie.” NMAAHC targets five key metros: New York, Washington, D.C., Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles, “philanthropic cities” that are among the nation’s largest, and that are headquarters for large corporations and made up of diverse populations that embrace multicultural causes.

Beyond using the contacts from the council, Duckens says NMAAHC has compiled an expansive database in which each individual and organization has been placed through a series of analytical screens for the greatest probability of donation, including contribution history; capacity for sizable gifts; interest in African American causes or preservation of history; and HBCU alumni status.

Bunch and his team have been successful in obtaining large contributions from African American donors such as former be 100s CEO Earl W. Stafford and his wife, Amanda, who have contributed $2 million. “When Lonnie came to speak to us he was inspiring,” says Amanda. “This museum is so significant we wanted to fund it all but we gave what we could.”

The pitches are often given at events that are similar to political fundraisers, in which wealthy sponsors hold intimate, pre-fixe events. The NMAAHC will hustle and wear out shoe leather to hook a big fish. Duckens secured Jesse Tyson, the former director of global aviation for ExxonMobil, as a fundraising host after “crashing” his retirement party. While there, she met and persuaded Albert Dotson, chairman of 100 Black Men of America, to place Bunch on the program of the civic organization’s 2011 conference. That presentation led to a reception for Bunch’s team in Miami that raised another $150,000.

Political activist and engineer Sinclair Skinner, who raised more than $225,000 at a fundraiser with Howard University alums says, “The payments are structured in a way that is achievable and, on top of that, they’re tax-deductible. For example, I committed $25,000, which I pay $1,000 at a time.”
Such efforts are also critical to obtaining government funding. “What we ended up doing for many years is having our private fundraising surpass the public money,” says Bunch. “Every year we’d say to Congress, ‘We just raised another $40 million and you need to do your fair share.’ That’s worked very well.” So far, Congress has approved $119.9 million of the $250 million pledge with $85 million pending in the 2013 budget request.

The campaign for dollars is not just targeted at members of the 1%. NMAAHC has developed a grassroots effort as well, pitching charter memberships for as little as $25, a strategy suggested by Earl Stafford to NMAAHC’s development team. “All of us have equity in this museum. Whether someone can give $100 or $1,000, we should not limit contributions by size of wallets.” As a result, the group has received gifts of $5 from senior citizens, and about $600 in coins from the Brooklyn Heights Montessori School. Now they’re adding social media outreach to the mix. “We want as many African Americans as possible to play a role in the development of this museum,” says Johnson Rice. “Getting small contributions is just as important as large corporate donations in reaching our goal.”

For Bunch, that campaign extends to acquiring artifacts. He and Associate Director for Curatorial Affairs Rex M. Ellis have traveled domestically and internationally to find historical objects and meet with collectors who have spent years identifying and authenticating relics of interest. He also encourages people to scour their attics, basements, and family albums for items that fully capture the trials and triumphs of people of African descent. To connect with community members, Bunch’s team came up with an innovative program called Saving African American Treasures, in which staff members traverse the country to help people preserve heirlooms ranging from old shawls to 19th-century photographs. “The big challenge of history museums is that they often fail to humanize it so people care,” says Bunch. “I wanted to start from the human perspective. So we began by collecting 8,000 oral interviews in the first two years and tens of thousands since then. This gives people not only a sense of ownership, but a chance to shape this museum.”

Parsons buttresses Bunch’s point: “It is often said that history is written by the winners, and to me the reality of this museum puts an exclamation mark at the end of the sentence that after 400 years, after all the struggle and triumph and tragedy and turbulence, we won.”

The full text of this article is also available online at: http://www.blackenterprise.com/news/the-250000000-mission-to-preserve-black-history/