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“Last Gasp for Foes of Barnes Move”

By Deborah Leavy |

YOGI BERRA once said, "It ain't over till it's over."

So it is with the legal wrangling over the Barnes Foundation, the internationally famous art collection housed in Merion that's slated to be moved to the Parkway in Philadelphia.

As we should all know by now, Albert Barnes was the eccentric millionaire who mixed the paintings of Renoir, Matisse, Cezanne, Picasso and others with odd iron hardware and other artifacts from around the world in his own peculiar theory of art education. He left his collection in a trust, stipulating that it never be moved from the stately mansion he had constructed to display it.

A cabal of Philadelphia's rich and powerful - wealthy individuals and foundations, plus influential pols - decided that what they wanted was more important than Dr. Barnes' wishes, so they went to court to break the trust governing the collection. And, as the rich and powerful so often do, they won.

They also wrested control of the collection from Lincoln University, the nation's oldest black college, which Dr. Barnes specified should govern the trust. Lincoln objected strenuously (some people called the move "an insult") until Gov. Rendell, an early proponent of the move, promised the university \$80 million. It was an offer they couldn't refuse.

Game over? Not so, say the Friends of the Barnes, the group formed by Merion neighbors of the Barnes that now includes others who oppose the move.

The judge refused to let them present their views in the suit to break the Barnes will. Despite that, and the ruling allowing the Barnes to move to Philadelphia, Friends of the Barnes continues to fight to keep the collection as it was, and as it is.

What makes opponents of the move so stubborn is their appreciation not only of Dr. Barnes and his wishes but the incomparable experience of viewing his collection as he intended it to be.

It's difficult, if not impossible, to convey what it's like to visit the Barnes collection in its serene surroundings. It's been described by art-lovers as "one of the premier American cultural monuments of the 20th century." Another noted, "The Barnes is a work of art in itself, more than the sum of its fabulous parts," calling it "one of the greatest art installations I have ever seen." Matisse himself proclaimed it "the only sane place" he'd seen in the U.S. for the display of art.

Many who have followed the brouhaha over the Barnes blame the institution's Merion neighbors for complaining about the Barnes years ago, and wonder why, as founders of

Friends of the Barnes, they are now fighting to keep it in Merion. The neighbors say they have been misunderstood.

"We never wanted the Barnes to leave," said Nancy Herman, a member of the Friends. "There were interstate buses idling on our street for hours, spewing their exhaust. We assumed when we protested to the board" - of the Barnes Foundation - "they would take our concerns into consideration. They did not."

Instead, the Barnes Foundation sued the neighbors as well as Lower Merion Township in federal court, and years of litigation cost the Barnes millions of dollars paid to well-connected law firms, draining much-needed funds when its finances were already precarious.

THREE foundations, led by Pew, itself a charitable trust, pledged to give the Barnes millions of dollars - but only if it would move to Philadelphia.

Rendell has promised the Barnes \$25 million more in tax dollars toward its move. The same money could keep the Barnes afloat in Merion, but in the process of "saving" the Barnes, these philanthropists would destroy it. "This isn't a rescue plan, it is a corporate takeover," the author of a book on the subject says.

The collection will never be the same if it is moved to the site of the Youth Study Center. Said Herman of Friends of the Barnes, "They seem to think they can remove the heart of the place and transplant it to a new building. This move is a gigantic mistake that cannot be allowed to happen."

So Friends of the Barnes is making a last-ditch effort to stop them, hiring a creative lawyer who has convinced Montgomery County to offer the Barnes \$50 million in a leaseback arrangement, enough to make the Barnes financially viable in Merion. The Barnes has refused.

Sure it would be easier for more people to see the paintings if they were moved to Center City. But rather than move the collection, why not move the people to where all can enjoy the transformative experience of seeing it where it belongs. Shuttle buses from Center City and other places around Philadelphia would seem to be an easier solution than the cultural vandalism of dismantling the collection.

A handful of wealthy people want to use their power to ruin an artistic jewel. For art's sake, I hope they don't succeed. *

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