Local library display features mementos of civil rights activist

By Lillian Cox
SPECIAL TO TODAY’S LOCAL NEWS

OCEANSIDE — On Inauguration Day, an exhibit of memorabilia belonging to local civil rights activist E. Marie Swan will debut at the Oceanside Civic Center Library.

Swan, the recipient of Oceanside’s Martin Luther King Jr. Civic Achievement Award in 2000, has many mementos from her days as a civil rights marcher. They will be on display at the library through February in recognition of Black History Month.

Meanwhile, Swan is recuperating from a heart attack she suffered Jan. 9.

“Marie said it was important that young people know all that happened in the civil rights movement and those who made the election of President Barack Obama possible,” said Monica Chapa-Domerq, cultural services librarian. “She added that any form of protest needs to be peaceful and nonviolent.”

Swan admits this was a difficult lesson for her as an 18-year-old adviser for the youth chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1963.

“Growing up in the all-black community of Wilmington, N.C., I experienced firsthand what segregation was about,” Swan said in a commentary in The San Diego Union-Tribune in 2003. “I resolved that if I ever had the opportunity,

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I would make a difference in the way things were. The only problem was that I was very hotheaded and militant.”

During the summer of 1963, Swan applied to work for Martin Luther King Jr. When she was turned down, she asked to plead her case with King in person.

“After listening to me rant and rave about how good I was and how I could change my community, Dr. King told me that I could not be a part of the movement because I was too angry,” she wrote. “He told me there was too much anger and hatred inside of me. This hurt, but it got my attention.”

Swan said that after restless night of self-reflection, she decided it was time to adopt a more peaceable attitude. She immersed herself in study of King’s theory of nonviolence.

“The March on Washington doesn’t seem that long ago,” she wrote in 2003. “Yes, I was there. The largest group of kids there was from Wilmington. Yes — I eventually became their leader and, yes — I continue to this day to be influenced and inspired by Dr. King.”

Among the items Swan loaned to the library is a three-ring binder containing newspaper clippings, original photos and a piece of a blanket she slept on in a Washington, D.C., jail after she was arrested for demonstrating.

Also included is a Bible she carried and a pennant from the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on Aug. 28, 1963, where King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech.

“As she spoke about each piece of the collection, it became clear how deeply personal and sometimes painful her memories are,” Chapa-Domerq said. “As far as the election of Obama, she said, ‘It’s about time.’”

In 1998 Swan produced “A Long Hot Summer,” an award-winning documentary detailing her role in the civil rights movement, for KOCT, a community cable television station in Oceanside.

Swan is currently vice chairwoman of the education committee of the Oceanside Chamber of Commerce and a past president of the Oceanside Pacific Kiwanis Club.

Lillian Cox is a freelance writer who lives in Encinitas.

Civil rights exhibit

WHERE Oceanside Civic Center Library,
330 N. Coast Highway
WHEN Opens Tuesday; continues through February.
HOURS 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. Mondays through Wednesdays; 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays; closed Sundays.
INFORMATION (760) 435-5600

Monica Chapa-Domerq, cultural services librarian for the Oceanside Public Library, admires E. Marie Swan’s collection of memorabilia from her days as a civil rights activist.

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