Columbus photographer Kojo Kamau, known for his black-and-white pictures of famous African-American figures and for documenting the local African-American community, has died at age 77.

Kamau died Monday afternoon of an apparent heart attack, said Demetries Neely, executive director of the King Arts Complex and a good friend of Kamau’s.

"In his photos are the history of America," she said. "He has beautiful photos of the civil-rights movement, of presidents coming through Columbus, but then he also documented things in our community, too, that allow us to preserve our history."

Boxer Muhammad Ali and President Barack Obama are among the celebrities photographed by Kamau. Throughout his 50-year career, he also specialized in photos of Columbus street scenes, shops and people.

His photographs have been exhibited at the Columbus Museum of Art, the Chicago Center of Science and Industry, and the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, among other venues. Some of his work is currently on display in "Kojo: Eyewitness to History," which continues into May at the National Afro-American Museum & Cultural Center in Wilberforce.

Kamau won numerous awards, including the 2006 Ohioana Library Career Award, 2011 King Arts Complex Legends & Legacies Award and the 2013 Raymond J. Hanley Fellowship award, give by the Greater Columbus Arts Council.

Nannette Maciejunes, executive director of the Columbus Museum of Art, called Kamau's passing "a hole you can't fill."

She said she plans to honor Kamau with a tribute wall at the museum featuring photos and text explaining his importance to the community. She particularly treasured Kamau's photos of famed Columbus woodcarver and barber Elijah Pierce.

"For me, the barber shop lives in those photos. They're so vibrant and evocative that you really understand the context and environment those great photographs come out of."

Kamau, who was born in Columbus on Oct. 11, 1939, bought his first camera as a teenager and studied at the Columbus College of Art and Design for three years before joining the U.S. Air Force in 1960.

Four years later, he became a photographer in the medical illustration department at Ohio State University, a job he had -- eventually earning the title of chief medical photographer -- until 1994.

Kamau also was an adjunct professor at Columbus State from 1997 until his death, although declining health had prevented him from working there for roughly the past year, according to associate professor Gene Strickland, a colleague.

Strickland said Kamau enjoyed working with students at the school’s black-and-white film laboratory.

"He had a super-strong work ethic," he said. "At age 75, he was still showing up, he was never late and never left early. And he was a super-nice guy."

Neely, who said Kamau had a "sharing heart," emphasized his importance to the Columbus arts scene.

"He was talented beyond compare, but it was his spirit that made him so inviting," she said. "Every time I saw him, he was the same. He was always kind, and he cared about supporting the arts any way he could. He gave his time and his talent."

No information was immediately available on funeral arrangements.

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Caption: Photo Kojo Kamau, left, and Pepper Johnson listen to speakers at the Columbus Metropolitan Library in 2013. Kamau, who died Monday, was an award-winning photographer who captured images of international celebrities and documented everyday life in the local African-American community. TOM DODGE/DISPATCH FILE PHOTO

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