

School spirit: Preserving the past Capital School District honors Booker T. Washington School

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DOVER — Childhood memories formed many years ago have transformed into the history of today for former students of Booker T. Washington Elementary School.

Capital School District officials have made sure that the school's history has been preserved and its' stories are now on display as they unveiled two new areas for mementos right inside the school's historic wing off Forrest Avenue on Monday afternoon.

Dozens of people who visited Booker T. Washington Elementary on Monday attended the school in between its opening in November 1922 until it became known as West Dover Elementary following integration in 1965.

It was the state's largest African-American school when it opened. The photographs, documents and listings of old classmates' names brought memories of days long ago rushing back.

“This is where my wife (Helen) and I met,” said Clarence Wallace Hicks, now 91-years-old. “We were in a play together right up on the stage over there — of course the stage is a little bit different now — and we played lovers in the show and then we ended up together for more than 70 years now.”



Clarence Wallace Hicks, 91, of Dover met his wife at Booker T. Washington School 70 years ago. (Special to the Delaware State News/Gary Emeigh)

Mary Pauls said she attended Booker T. Washington and her mother worked in the school's cafeteria.

'It's overwhelming...,' she said. 'A lot of the things that we did are coming back to me. I'm very glad they're honoring the school's history like they are.'

Changing with the times

According to the Delaware Public Archives, the school opened in November 1922, when 210 children and six teachers moved from two old school buildings on Slaughter Street and Division Street.

The Delaware School Auxiliary Association provided the funds for the Booker T. Washington building through the generosity of P.S. du Pont. The school, originally built for grades one through eight, was expanded to ninth and 10th-grade students in 1935.



Alfreda Fisher-Dean attended first grade at Booker T. Washington Elementary School in 1952.

Many former students at Booker T. Washington School became angry when it went through a name change to West Dover Elementary following integration in 1965.

‘If you’ve ever been someplace and you know what’s happened there, it becomes a part of you,’ said Alfreeda Fisher-Dean. ‘Then when they changed it to West Dover I served on the committee and helped get it back to Booker T.’



Mary Pauls (right) talking with her husband Larry after touring Booker T. Washington School Monday. She attended the school from 1957 -63.

‘We went to bed one night and it was Booker T. and when we woke up the next morning the school board committee had changed it to West Dover. But we fought to get it back to Booker T. Washington.’

The school’s original name was restored in 1998.

Saving a piece of history

Then, when they heard that the Capital School District was considering tearing the old school down, they went to work on securing its preservation.

“I was the one who chaired the committee so that this building would not get torn down because it was up for demolition,” Mr. Hicks said. “I was at a board meeting when they said they were going to tear it down and I opposed it.

“The next day I received a call from the president of the school board and he asked me if I would put together a committee and come up with ideas with what to do with the building. We did and we were able to save the building.”



Former students, teachers and administrators touring the renovations at Booker T. Washington School.

The historic wing of Booker T. Washington Elementary is now serving another generation of students who face a different set of challenges as the main site of Kent County Community School’s programs for pre-kindergarten through fourth grade.

KCCS provides a learning experience for students who exhibit a variety of disabilities that include physical, sensory, cognitive, communication and those that are medically fragile. The school also provides support to the district’s Autism program.

Honoring the past

While the historic wing of the Booker T. Washington School has been rebuilt and outfitted for the future, the Capital School District wanted to do something to recognize its past.

“The idea was if we were going to rebuild this historic building that we also needed to capture the history and it was really important to the construction committee,” said Capital School District superintendent Dan Shelton, “which is why we really started in earnest in going out to the community and saying, ‘If you don’t want to give us the originals at least give us the copies of what you have so that we can really display and show.’”

He said he wasn’t surprised at the large turnout at Monday’s unveiling of the museum pieces honoring the school’s heritage.

“It’s amazing,” Shelton said. “The stories that (former students) tell are just unbelievable.

“A lot of these guys lived through not only Booker T. in its original form but a lot of them lived through the process of integration, either through themselves or through their children, so the stories they have to tell are just amazing and one of a kind.”

Sean Christiansen, the president of the Capital School Board, said just meeting some of the people with ties to the historic school made it all worthwhile.

“Just seeing the faces of the past is amazing,” he said. “Generations have come through here and you get to see students, teachers and administrators come through here over the years.

“To honor the heritage and the history of this school, you can see it in those faces that are here today.”

Mr. Christiansen said the historic project is not quite finished.

“The only thing we have left to do is to plant a walnut tree out front and a cherry tree,” he said. “We’re going to be planting those trees in the fall to make (the school) even more authentic to its history.”

Mr. Hicks knows the community can’t go back and recreate history — and it probably doesn’t want to — but it can honor the past.

He is pleased the Capital School District has done just that.

“I think they did a beautiful job,” said Mr. Hicks. “I know it’s not exactly as the old school was but it is close and I’m well pleased with what they have done.”

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