

Mecklenburg's black history

By Patrick Love
Feb 3, 2015



Members of the Historically Black Schools of Mecklenburg County, Va., committee who were present when the Enterprise stopped by the R.T. Arnold Library to view their display included, front row from left, W.P. Hudgins, Gean Spain, Gloria Crutchfield-Townsend, Ann Garnett Miller, Lucille T. Hudson, Lorene Smith Johnson, Juanita Hudgins, Geraldine Newell and Florence Macklin. In back are Glanzly Spain, John Royster, Herman Bracey, Doreatha Bracey, Lincoln Sturdifen, Carnell Newell and Inez Boyd.

To this day, those who were educated through Mecklenburg County's historically black schools during the segregation era remain close-knit families. They have strong, vibrant alumni bases that keep in touch through national alumni associations and regular fellowshiping events, etc.

This February during Black History Month, as the nation focuses on the struggle Americans of African descent endured to gain basic human and civil rights, alumnus of Mecklenburg County's historically black schools for the first time have come together under one banner with one mission — to tell the story of the struggle to educate African-Americans in Mecklenburg County during the segregation era.

CONT

A committee calling itself Historically Black Schools of Mecklenburg County, Va., has organized a Black History Month display in the conference room at South Hill's R.T. Arnold Library that features information on the pioneers of black education in Mecklenburg County and the desegregation process in the county's public schools, as well as displays featuring each of the county's four predominant historically black high schools, Mecklenburg County Training School, Thyne Institute, East End High School and West End High School.

According to W.P. Hudgins, a former teacher, principal and administrator with the Mecklenburg County public school division both during and after segregation who remains the only African-American board of supervisors chair in the county's history, the committee believes there is a need for those who lived through segregation to tell their stories now, both to record historical events as well as to avoid repeating past mistakes.

"You don't know where you're going unless you can look back and can see from whence you have come," Hudgins said. "If we forget, then we'll fall back into the same situation, and that's what's happening right now, things seemingly going back. We are the ones to tell this story. If we don't do it, then our generation is lost, because the next generation has no knowledge of it. They assume that everything's just like it is today, and it didn't happen that way. It was a tremendous sacrifice on the part of parents to enable us to get an education."

According to Hudgins and other committee members, the process of desegregation in Mecklenburg County during the late 1960s was fairly smooth, spurred on by both white and black community leaders who held the same goals and mutual respect for one another.

The real struggle to educate African-Americans in Mecklenburg County seemingly came decades earlier, when black communities and churches banded together to lobby for the education of all youths in the county, not just the white ones, and the building of school facilities for blacks.

Lucille T. Hudson, a South Hill native who is 96 years old, witnessed many of the events during her lifetime.

Initially educated in a one-room school, Hudson graduated from the county's first black public high school, the Mecklenburg County Training School in South Hill, in 1934. She eventually returned to that same one-room school her education began in as a teacher and was the last elementary supervisor for blacks in the county prior to desegregation. She retired from the Mecklenburg County public school system in 1979 after 43 years in education.

Hudson said in the early years, during the early 1900s, the situation in black public schools was deplorable.

"You can't visualize nothing for blacks," she said.

Many of the early black schools in the county were Rosenwald schools, named after Julius Rosenwald, an American clothier who became part-owner and president of Sears, Roebuck and Company.

"He found out that blacks in the south had few opportunities to go to school, so this man gave a large sum of money with the idea that we could get some education for blacks," Hudgins said. "He went to the school systems and said, 'If you put up a certain amount of money, the

parents put up a certain amount of money, I will put up a certain amount of money, and they built these one-, two- and three-room schools," Hudgins said.

Parents and churches played a major role in these early schools for blacks. Often, the schools, some of which are still standing, were built adjacent to church properties and carried the same name as the church.

For her part, Hudson counts herself as a follower of Matilda Booker, who was one of the most influential community leaders in the early years of black education in Mecklenburg County.

According to information included in the library display, Booker graduated from the Thyne Institute in Chase City, which was a private school funded through the Presbyterian church at the time, and Virginia State University. She became supervisor of black education in Mecklenburg County in 1920 and soon started organizing the black community to lobby for the construction of a public high school for blacks in the South Hill area.

Churches, community organizations, parents and like-minded white citizens supported the construction of the Mecklenburg County Training School during the mid-1920s. Lumber, materials and hard labor for the school, which was located on Virginia Street in South Hill behind the present library location and burned in 1945, were donated or funded through the school's supporters.

Booker used similar strategies to rally community support for a black public high school in Clarksville. According to Ann Garnett Miller, a graduate of the school, West End High School was opened in September of 1935 with more than 100 students ages 13-22.

Booker retired her position in 1955 after 35 years of commuting 100 miles round trip each day during the school week. She died in 1957, sadly never being able to witness the desegregation of the school system.

Inez Boyd, who grew up in the Bracey area, said she recalls attending a one-room school and a three-room school before advancing to the Mecklenburg County Training School.

"I remember when there were no buses to and from," Boyd said. "Where I lived, the white school, they were bussed, but the black school, we had no buses coming. We had to walk. I think I had to walk three and a half miles. I think the first year when I graduated from grammar school was the first year that they started the buses to and from the Mecklenburg County Training School."

Hudgins noted in the early years of black education, training schools were designated for blacks while white students attended high schools.

Hudgins said he can recall the division supplying oil to put on the floors of black schools to keep the dust down, but that's about it.

"Basically, that was all I recall was given to blacks by the school board," he said. "Parents had to help provide most of the aids which we had to be able to learn. They provided fuel for the school, wood, they dug pits for the outhouses, and at the beginning they had to pay part of teachers' salaries."

Hudgins, who was the first principal of Hillcrest Elementary in Clarksville (now Clarksville Elementary School), said the county had come a long way by the time the public schools were desegregated in 1969.

"We had a smooth degree of integration, and I think it was because everyone attempted to make sure that everything worked very smoothly," he said. "So we didn't have some of the situations that we read about in other school systems. I think maybe for a few minor situations, everything worked very smoothly, to all of our surprise. I think the main thing was that everyone attempted to make sure that it was a smooth integration, the teachers, the parents, the principals, the superintendent and administrators, the staffs. It worked nicely. I really think we could have been integrated long before we did."

Even so, Hudgins noted that prejudices still existed. He recalled being promoted to the central office to replace the outgoing assistant superintendent for personnel.

"When I moved to the central office, the school board decided that I couldn't be titled what my predecessor's title was, so they titled me the administrative assistant, because they didn't want me to have the title of the person I was replacing."

After five years in the role, he was given the title of assistant superintendent.

One thing several of the committee members mentioned was that they grew up in strong family units where education was a priority.

“All of our parents taught us, if we didn’t get an education, we’ll be lost,” Hudgins said. “I know my Daddy constantly instilled in me, if you get an education, no one can take it from you. That’s the thing you’ll take to your grave. But anything else, someone can take. But an education is going to stick with you forever, and it’s going to take you places.”

Hudgins, who is chair of Historically Black Schools of Mecklenburg County, Va., said the committee hopes to be able to eventually open a museum of sorts where it can house the historical information and displays concerning the history of black education in Mecklenburg County.

Hudson, who is credited with the idea of bringing together the various alumni associations and forming a new committee out of them, said it’s important to make sure the history of African-American communities in Mecklenburg County and their struggle to gain equal opportunities and education is recorded.

“It’s a story that’s not written in nobody’s book,” she said. “So we are making an attempt to put this information out to the general public so they’ll know our history. So many of our own children now know nothing about it. That’s what we’re trying to do, put this history that we know about out.”

The library exhibit will be on display throughout the month of February in the conference room of the R.T. Arnold Library in South Hill. The exhibit is open to the public Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.