

Douglass High School Commemorative Committee

Frederick Douglass Elementary School Library

MEETING MINUTES

June 14, 2021, 6:30 p.m.

Approved

ATTENDEES:

Committee Members: Charles Avery, Erica Bush, Dwight Brooks, Gladys Burke, Valerie Bush, Tammy Carter, Carlotta Coates, Gertrude Evans, Glory Howard, Joyce Jackson, James Roberts, Larry Roeder, Larry Simms

Guests: Leesburg Town Council Member Neil Steinberg - 2 additional guests, Janet Wiggins and Charlotte Scott Coates

LCPS Staff: Lottie Spurlock, Bev Tate, Sara Howard-O'Brien, Donna Torraca

Absent: Margaret Good, Mary Randolph, Sylvia Smith, Michelle Thomas

Charles Avery and Erica Bush, Co-Chairs, DHS Commemorative Committee (Committee) welcomed everyone to the meeting and introduced themselves again to the group. Mr. Avery reminded everyone this was a public meeting and that guests were welcome to attend. He also reminded everyone to use the LCPS-DCS-RENOVATION email for communication among the Committee for FOIA purposes.

Ms. Bush offered the opportunity for members of the public attending the meeting to speak, ask any questions, or bring up any concerns. There were no members of the public who spoke at that time.

Charles then asked members of the Commemorative Committee that were not present last time to introduce themselves.

Leesburg Town Council Member Neil Steinberg introduced himself, not as a member of the Committee, but as an interested member of the public.

Tammy Carter introduced herself. Ms. Carter is the Chairperson for the MLK I Have A Dream Committee. She is also Vice President of the Teri & Shari Malone Foundation and Vice Chair of its scholarship fund. She does a lot of community work and is a member of Providence Baptist Church and Vice President of their Community Engagement Committee. She stated she is here to help in any way she can and to make Douglass HS a beautiful building and have what the community needs and wants.

Mr. Avery also asked the guests to introduce themselves. Janet Wiggins briefly introduced herself. She is on the MLK Committee and a member of the Loudoun Douglass Alumni Association. She was born and raised in Loudoun County and is a proud 1965 Graduate of Douglass High School.

The Committee reviewed the May 24 meeting minutes. Carlotta Coates made a motion to approve the minutes. Jim Roberts seconded. Erica then provided a brief recap of the May 24 meeting.

Discussion of History:

Mr. Avery stated when he was first asked to serve on the Committee, he was reluctant due to other commitments he currently has. He realized though that this is not just a Committee, it is an opportunity to put a mark on history, making history as history unfolds, and he is very honored to serve on this historical Committee. He introduced Mr. Larry Simms to talk about why he chose the profession of history and teaching.

Mr. Simms stated that he always questioned things, even as a young child, many times wondering why something happened. He is the youngest of seven in his family and lost his father when he was a senior in high school. He was not sure what to do after high school and his Mom encouraged him to go to college. In the 1960's, there were three options for young black men, military, construction worker or college. He attended Kentucky State, a black college known as a teaching school, along with several others from Loudoun County. When he enrolled, he did not know what career he wanted to pursue and found that he enjoyed history and political science. His original thought was to go into law when he graduated, and he completed the LSAT's and applied to various colleges. Prior to graduation from college in 1970 he returned home for a visit and decided to apply to Loudoun County Public Schools for a position. There weren't many black instructors at that time. It wasn't what he thought he wanted to do but he was hired at Lincoln Elementary School. The next year the school system went from two levels of education (elementary and high school) and added a middle school level. He then moved to the middle school and taught at that level for four years and taught history. When Park View High School opened, he moved again and found his home, teaching history there for 44 years. He is a civil rights and black history speaker now and each summer he spends a week studying somewhere, studying what he actually taught, traveling to historic sites through such programs as the NEH Endowment programs. This year he will be in Richmond, Virginia for a program regarding Brown vs. Board of Education. Mr. Simms concluded by saying that history is his passion, it is on going and something to be involved with.

Charles thanked Mr. Simms for sharing and said it has inspired him to ask each of the Committee members, what inspires them. Last week we talked about transportation and the struggles associated with that. He asked, "Who are the teachers that inspired"? What impact will the work we do now have for students who might come through the Douglass HS building and see what we display? A little-known fact, white students were bussed from their schools to Douglass because Douglass had two areas of study, cosmetology and brick laying, that was not offered at the other schools. He discussed, briefly, integration and segregation and that he is a graduate of 1968 when the school graduated its last class. He asked others to share stories that the conversations this evening have stirred in them.

Jim Roberts recalled that his most vivid memories were those of the teachers. His grandparents boarded teachers and they boarded the first Principal and his family. All the teachers he knew through the years, Liverpool, Bacate, Ingram, Sully, Sismick, those were the teachers the first year. We had teachers Mamie Rose, from Texas, Mr. Comegys, Mr. Nathan Edwards, that returned to visit Leesburg after they left and visit his grandparents. The teachers said it was like a second home to them and they were treated like family. The other memory he shared, his uncle was a custodian and the school was heated by a coal furnace in the basement. That's where he learned how to make a fire and tend it. When his uncle would get off work in the evenings, Mr. Roberts and his brother would shovel coal in the furnace to get it set for the night. They would

also help him clean the classrooms and the auditorium. There are many fond memories in the school for him. He met his wife there and they have been married sixty years.

Gert Evans shared that she is the youngest of six and all attended Douglass HS. She shared some photos of her memories at Douglass, and had a picture of the girls basketball team in the 1950's. Her sister was in the photo and they had won a championship. Working with the Edwin Washington Project she sees all the teachers' names and student names. It brings back memories from listening to her brothers and sisters over the years.

Next, Valerie Bush shared her story. Valerie's grandparents also boarded teachers. She shared her fathers' experience, Sterling Cook, as a school bus driver and football player who attended Douglass. Her father would drive the team to the game in the bus, play the game and then drive them home. It was fascinating that much responsibility was placed on a high school student to drive the school buses. She feels that once this is completed it will be a great memento for her daughter.

Valerie's story triggered a school bus memory for Charles of drag racing in the bus. There was a governor, a device to control the speed limit, on the bus but sometimes they weren't there. Card playing also occurred on the bus.

Glory Howard recalled that her husband, Carlton Howard, drove the bus in Middleburg. Glory was not allowed to ride the bus because of the drag racing. Ms. Howard attended Douglass, starting in 1959, which was the same year her husband graduated. Ms. Howard's brother and sister also attended Douglass. She remembers eating her lunch and then going down into the auditorium and at lunch time they would have dances and dance contests. She recalled the teachers ensuring that the students received their business education so that they could travel to DC for the civil service tests which would take most of the day. The teachers ensured that the students were prepared and able to pass.

Dwight Brooks recalled the time of segregation and felt that LCPS did a great job of educating him. The teachers were wonderful, and he does not feel that he missed a thing from his education. He mentioned that the teachers came from DC to teach at Douglass. Douglass was a good place to be. Dave Bing, a very well-known basketball player who came to Douglass with Ally Johnson to play in 1960. Douglass lost, 106-48, but there were some very well-known people who came to Douglass to play. Because of segregation they had to travel far and played schools in Annapolis, MD, Louisville, Indian Head and it was a great experience. He also shared that his in-laws drove from NYC to California using the Green Book. His wife's mother is from Richmond and she was in the first chorus line at the Cotton Club. He is thankful to the Countywide League and all they did to make the school a reality. He shared that he read an article recently about people in Herndon complaining about the Latino men hanging at the 7-Eleven seeking work. When Mr. Brooks grew up that's what black men had to do. The system was not bad as separate, but it was unequal, with students getting secondhand books from Loudoun County High School when that school received new books. But they were happy to receive them. Mr. Brooks said he thanks those teachers every day for the education he received.

Charles stated that many times those teachers were only a few years older than the students.

Janet Wiggins enjoyed attending Douglass and was very involved in extra-curricular activities. The teachers were wonderful. Ms. Hotten, Mr. and Mrs. Simms, Ms. Hangerson. Mr. Davis was an English Teacher and helped with the majorettes' group and was in charge of a play, Madam Butterfly. She remembers how meticulous he was and what a great teacher, but all the teachers were.

While Gladys Burke did not grow up here, she has lived here now for over thirty years. The elementary school she attended was similar, but she has wonderful memories and felt she received a great education and recalled the lunches. She felt that what the Loudoun Douglass High School Alumni Association has done in keeping the memory of Douglass HS alive is a beautiful thing. While she lived through segregation, she felt that she too received a fantastic education and she doesn't feel it's anything less than those that attended white schools.

Charles recalled having the choice to go to a white school but chose to remain at Douglass. He remembered being in a trigonometry class with five students. His Guidance Counselor, Ms. Briscoe, gave him the confidence to attend the University of Virginia, even though it was so much larger than Douglass HS.

Charles then asked Larry Roeder to state again what he found in the walls at the Union Street School/Training Center.

Larry explained the records used in the Edwin Washington project, principally come from the Training School and go all the way back to the beginning of segregation. In one visit to the building, using a flashlight, he noticed a glint of color in the wall. He pulled on a plank and realized inside that wall were ceiling tiles that the teachers used to put the program for the school. He continued on, sharing a story connected to Pearl Harbor and how Douglass High School played a critical role in the war. Sailors many times were shooting at American planes rather than Japanese planes so the U.S. Navy asked a number of schools, including Douglass High School, to come up with silhouettes of models of American planes to train the soldiers to identify the American planes so they weren't shooting down their own men.

Charles stated that there has been research done regarding Douglass alumni who served in the wars. That is another area of interest about Douglass High School.

Erica reviewed the Mission with the Committee and talked about the timeline for commemoration on the school. What years does the Committee want to focus on? She asked if there were any additional thoughts on the timeframe. She asked for a show of hands for all those in favor of 1941-1968 as the scope. There were 10 in favor. Some people abstained from the vote. She then gave those who had another timeframe in mind to share their thoughts.

Dwight feels the Committee should keep an open mind at this point. I have reached out to former classmates to search for items that might prompt further discussion. He feels there may be more beyond 1968 and does not want to ignore the contributions from those who attended Douglass after the school closed in 1968.

Gladys echoed Dwight's statement. She feels Douglass history continued on after 1968.

Larry discussed his desire to have a room at the school for the documents the Edwin Washington Project has been cataloguing. He offered that you could definitely cover more than just 1941 to 1968.

There was a question as to whether that research would be a conflict with Thomas Balch Library and Larry explained that it would not and further that Thomas Balch Library does not have the space.

Larry Simms asked how a room like that would be monitored and Mr. Roeder shared his vision and his background and training to manage this data, training people as docents to share this information.

Erica inquired whether the allocation of certain spaces is what the Committee is tasked with but she believes the Committee focus is on the artifacts and commemoration aspect, not the room usage.

Sara explained that there are multiple discussions going on at the School Board level regarding the renovation of Douglass HS. There have been requests from three different organizations, the Edwin Washington Project, The Loudoun Douglass High School Alumni Association and the NAACP for long-term dedicated space within Douglass HS. The School Board is taking that under advisement. The Committee's basic intent is to focus on Douglass High School and the commemoration of that story and what took place, similar to the stories shared tonight. You can go before or after that timeframe, that's a decision you can make. The Committee's intent is to capture the tremendous story of what happened at Douglass High School specifically. The decision and discussion about dedicated office space is a separate discussion at the School Board level.

Valerie suggested perhaps, since the majority wanted to focus on 1941-1968, that could be the core focus and then also include something before and after, but the main focus is the 1941-1968.

Neil Steinberg, recognizing that he was not a member of the Committee, but wanted to share that the history leading up to the school being built in 1941 is important, as well as what followed. This information will provide context and would be important to include.

Charles shared that his class refers to themselves as the Legacy Group, focusing on what Douglass produced and how the students of Douglass have contributed to the greater community after their education and celebrate that.

Erica suggested tabling the timeline discussion for another meeting and the Committee moved into their Sub-Committees of Inside and Outside. Each group will have a scribe for what ideas are exchanged and another person to report back to the full Committee.

INSIDE COMMITTEE:

Items discussed included:

- Diorama of what Leesburg looked like during the time-period

- Names of Graduates/Alumni etched on something (i.e. wall, bricks, etc.); Information needed: how many graduates and how many students attended? Discussed the concept of “The Wall of Graduates” and a separate listing of all students that attended
- Acknowledging living legends: Alise Berry and others. Spotlight individuals and positive impacts they have made on a rotating basis, maybe by computer screen. Record speeches and capture information and stories.
- Names of Countywide League, Principals, NAACP
- Timeline for feeder schools – Carver, Banneker, Oak Grove etc. prior to Douglass High School
- Interactive booths with historical information
- Teacher wall with photos, what they taught and time period
- Name plates/placards on rooms (i.e. home ec, coaches, etc.)
- Moving photo on wall that runs continuously
- Acknowledge custodians, bus drivers, other staff such as cafeteria, administration, secretaries; do we have the names of the Countywide League, principals, teachers, NAACP members
- Wall of graduates and another for those who attended
- Professions of alumni and notable people
- Display cases with memorabilia, yearbooks, artifacts; also cited an exhibit where the viewer could push a button or click on a link and there would be a history lesson on a topic (person, music, time period). The Harper’s Ferry hologram was also cited as a potential exhibit concept.

OUTSIDE COMMITTEE:

- Determine where the Rock Commemoration next to flag pole should be located
- Determine the relocation of the garden for Margaret Lloyd
- Provide light for the historical plaque on the wall to the west of the entrance door
- Create and bury a time capsule – as part of dedication
- Historical markers on property – correct white sign and create something that stands out more
- Trailhead sign at W&OD Trail
- Historic pathway
- Personal pavers with students’ names
- Determine name for entrance sign (and building) – Should include Douglass HS
- Statue in front plaza with lighting, something with movement and students¹
- Create movement with water and lighting
- Benches with acknowledgement of teachers, principals, school awards
- Signage with flowering and continuous color – perhaps water feature as a part of the sign
- Murals in the outside basketball court area depicting a timeline with graphics

¹ Much more was said about this which is not covered in the minutes. Much of the focus was on the model I had proposed which was included in the basic information packet. Two children walking up a slope to school.

The subcommittees came together and each group reported to the larger group. Tammy Carter was the spokesperson for the Outside subcommittee and Dwight Brooks was the spokesperson for the Inside subcommittee.

Sara provided an overview of the June 28th Committee meeting to be held at Douglass High School. The meeting will start 30 minutes early (6 pm) and will begin in the gym. There will be a tour of the building and the regular committee meeting will be held at the school. This will provide the committee the opportunity to consider their ideas in the space. Prior to the tour the partitions that have been added around the stage and extending into the auditorium/gymnasium will be removed. The drop ceiling will also be removed. The space, from a structural perspective, will look closer to how it looked in 1941. Dinner will be provided. It was requested that members fill out the sandwich preference form so that dinner can be ordered in advance. It was also noted that LCPS staff will be video taping and taking pictures of the interior space for future reference.

The Committee was also briefed on the tours to occur on June 29th. The members of the major stakeholder organizations have been invited to tour the building as well as the Board of Supervisors, Town Council, and School Board along with various County and Town staff. Any Committee members may also come but we ask that anyone wishing to come sign up through the links or phone number provided on the invitations that were distributed. If the number of slots per hour fill up, the number will either be expanded, or we will add additional time. The tours on the 29th will be held from 9 am through 6 pm.

At the end of the meeting the Co-Chairs asked if there were any additional comments or questions. Charles encouraged members to think about what each can do, who each could talk to, who can we interview to facilitate the Committee's work. Valerie Bush noted that there is contact information available for teachers that taught at Douglass. Charles asked if the Committee could have the opportunity to talk with an architect or landscaper to start formulating/sketching out the ideas of the Committee. Tammy offered to assist with a sketch of the outside vision. She offered to put together examples of the concepts the Outside Committee had discussed so that the Committee could review to pick and choose what they would like to see. She could then do an initial sketch for the architect to expand upon.

With no further input, the meeting adjourned.