

Teaching a New Generation a Lesson in Resilience

Fairview Elementary School, 2014

Courtesy of Fairview / E. S. Brown Heritage Corporation

The old one-room schoolhouse in Cave Spring, Georgia, had nearly surrendered to kudzu, its floor and roof sagging and caving. But when Joyce Perdue-Smith, the daughter of one of the school's former principals, learned that the Fairview Elementary School was still there, she said, "There is no way we are going to let that go."

Fairview, built in 1924, is believed to have been a "Rosenwald school" for African American students, one of nearly 5,000 schools built between 1912 and 1932 in rural areas of 15 southern states. Their mission: to bridge the stark disparity of educational opportunity that existed between black and white communities of the time.

The schools were the product of an unlikely alliance between black author, educator, and orator Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald, Jewish philanthropist and president of Sears, Roebuck and Co. While Washington conceived the idea, Rosenwald supplied the seed money—to be matched by the community.

Although most of these schools were largely forgotten in the decades after school desegregation, one dedicated group, led by Perdue-Smith, is doing its best—with the help of a Georgia Humanities grant—to ensure, in Perdue-Smith's words, "that the Fairview school lives on to educate, inform, and remind visitors of a unique and challenging educational period for African Americans."

Perdue-Smith, who teaches accounting at Shorter College, established and is the executive director of the Fairview/E. S. Brown Heritage Corporation. In this position, she has extensively recruited more than 200 school alumni to help support the creation of several exhibitions, as well as the eventual preservation and renovation of the school.

According to alumni, while Fairview certainly provided "the 3 R's," the lasting education was the life-affirming, character-building skills of having



pride, respect, and determination to move beyond poverty and limited opportunity. Their daily mantra was "Good, better, best, I will not let it rest, until my good is better, and my better is best."

Fairview alumnus Ted Barnet fondly remembered his teachers, who "taught us to keep our head up and our mind focused, to do our best, and to appreciate things even though life was hard."

A Georgia Humanities grant, which supplemented other funds donated by the community, helped create a permanent exhibition at the Cave Spring History Museum, as well as a portable, museum-quality exhibition that has toured the area.

The permanent exhibition features a recreated typical classroom, complete with both teacher and student desks, textbooks, and sample classroom assignments. Both exhibitions were designed by alu mni, with many original items donated by former teachers and students. Visitors unfamiliar with the history of segregated education had the period brought to life before their eyes.

The exhibition also featured a replica of a schoolbus, made of a truck plus bus parts, and crafted by a student's father at the time. Perdue-Smith said, "It's a great example of how the community pulled together in the name of educating their children."

