

After falling into disrepair, apartment complex proposed to preserve Pittsylvania County's first black high school

Halle Parker Mar 13, 2019



The overgrown Blairs Middle School sign stands outside the building as a reminder of what it once was about 15 years ago.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

BLAIRS — Flipping through the hardbound pages of his high school's history, Edward Hairston pointed out the teachers and students that he still remembered 53 years after attending Pittsylvania County's first high school for black students.

Within the first couple pages, he stopped on the face of his old agricultural education teacher and assistant principal at Southside High School. That teacher pushed him to take a curriculum that would allow him to go to college.

Pushing the book forward, Hairston placed a finger on the photo and said, “What he saw in me made me who I am today.”

For Hairston and other Southside High School alumni, the school building holds sentimental value and reminds them of the days that shaped the rest of their lives.

With plans in place to turn the now-vacant building into an apartment complex, Hairston said the alumni of the school have hope that their beloved building has a chance for a new life.

Executives in the Winston-Salem, North Carolina-based Landmark Group — the historic real estate development group proposing the apartment complex — said the project fits “right in line” with their mission to repurpose structures to help revitalize rural areas.

“We are a rural community historic real estate developer,” said John Stiltner, the group’s director of development and construction management services. “Blair is a rural community, and that’s a historic building.”

Landmark Group Vice President Sam Sari said, “It’s a great school with a lot of support, and you hate to see a building like that torn down. ... It’s better to refurbish and then put it back to use.”

The school building, which turned into Blairs Middle School during desegregation, has fallen into disrepair. After the middle school closed in 2004, discussions ensued regarding what to do with the building.



Southside High School alumnus Edward Hairston points to the school's alma mater in the book on the school's history on Wednesday. He said he's thankful that there is a proposal out there that would return the school building to a better state.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

Throughout the years, different boards of supervisors debated tearing down the structure after neglecting its upkeep.



In its present condition, the now-closed Blairs Middle School has fallen into disrepair with broken windows and boarded up doors after years of neglect. A historic real estate development group has proposed to turn the inside of the building into a 55-unit apartment complex, preserving its original structure and exterior.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

Meanwhile, alumni of Southside High School pushed for the county to request for the school to be registered as a historic landmark like the now-closed Whitmell School, which served only white students during the segregation era.

“They had time to keep this building maintained,” said Hairston of the county. “They dropped the ball.”

The Landmark Group plans to submit an application to add the school building to the registry of historic sites in order to receive the historic tax credits necessary to do the proposed project. As a historic place, the exterior of the building would have to remain unchanged.

Sari and Stiltner said the apartment complex would host 55 units — a mixture of one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments — and include a variety of amenities such as a communal washer and dryer room, light fixtures and central air and heat. The apartment complex would also have an exercise room, community room with computers and an outdoor picnic shelter and playground area.

It would also be “fairly energy efficient,” said Sari.

“You wouldn’t think that a historic building would be efficient, but it is,” he said. “And it will still look like a school, that’s the cool part.”

For Hairston, it’s about retaining the alumni’s heritage. Gesturing out to his right, he said, “It’s better to point to a building than a flat piece of land.”

Even as an apartment building, Hairston said, he’d still be able to walk through it and figure out which part was his classroom.

The apartment complex will be reserved for working-class households within a certain income range as part of the federal low-income housing tax credit program, not to be confused with section 8 housing.



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The program is meant to incentivize the development of affordable rental housing where the tenant is still responsible for all of the rent whereas with section 8 housing, the rent is subsidized.

Sari and Stiltner said their group is working on two projects for Danville and completed one for Martinsville, so they're familiar with the housing needs of this region.

“There’s a massive demand for it in Danville and surrounding area,” said Sari.

On Tuesday night, the Pittsylvania County Board of Supervisors voted 6-0 to approve the rezoning of the school’s property from agricultural to residential for a multi-family home. Supervisor Bob Warren wasn’t present and sent a letter to apologize for his absence.

Supervisor Tim Barber, who represents the Tunstall district and has been on the board since 2004, said he was glad the board had waited to decide what to do with the building.

“I couldn’t think of anything better to do with this building,” said Barber on Tuesday night, adding that he attended Blairs Middle School in eighth grade.

Hairston said Barber had been in talks with the Landmark Group early in the process and arranged a meeting between the developers and Hairston to talk about the significance of the former high school.

Sari and Stiltner said that county officials had been “perfect to work with.”

“The county’s been great partners,” said Sari. “We’ve very much enjoyed working with them.”

Supervisor Elton Blackstock said the county was lucky to have the project proposal fall into their laps, recognizing that this is “an important building for our African-American friends in the county.”

“This is a way out for us for the building to be preserved and also to be utilized by all in the community,” said Blackstock. “I think it’s a win-win.”



Southside High School alumnus Edward Hairston holds up the hardbound history of his school that closed in 1969 and was turned into Blairs Junior High School during desegregation.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

Sari and Stiltner said the project is still only in the proposal phase as it would need to be accepted by the Virginia Housing and Development Authority and earn a designation as a historic place.

“It’s very competitive,” said Stiltner.

They said they wouldn’t know if the project could move forward until around June. If their proposal is accepted, they said the group aims to begin construction in July of 2020 and open the apartments in August of 2021.

Anonymous Instagram posting spurs mold probe at Averett

Halle Parker Feb 14, 2019



An anonymous Instagram account created by Averett University students posted this photo on Thursday, claiming that it was “a colony of mold on a windowsill” in an Averett apartment.

Contributed photo

Frustrated over Averett University’s handling of maintenance and longstanding mold issues, a group of unnamed students decided to create an anonymous Instagram account to post photos of unresolved problems.

The account began posting photos on Tuesday, stating students privately messaged the images and descriptions to the account.

“This page is now the voice of the student body,” wrote the owners of the account in a direct message on Instagram to a Register & Bee reporter.

The students behind the account refused to name themselves.

In response to the account’s creation, Averett University held a private meeting open to all students on Thursday at noon, alerting students in a campus-wide email on Wednesday.

“We have recently heard some facilities concerns about the residence halls on campus,” stated the email on Wednesday. “We take these concerns very seriously, and want to hear directly from you.”

Averett University Director of Marketing and Communications Cassie Jones said the meeting saw upward of 30 students for what she described as an “open” and “transparent” conversation.

“We felt like we had a really productive conversation and are looking forward to more in the future,” said Jones. She said they cleared up some confusion and took note of student complaints.

Instagram

Search



averett_university_problems

Following



27 posts 133 followers 125 following

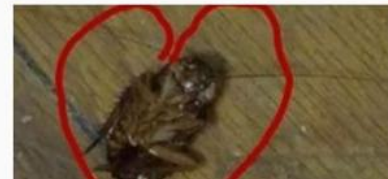
Au garbage

Photos are posted anonymously

DM PHOTOS of poor living conditions @ AVERETT UNIVERSITY. maybe they'll do something about pricing or fix the issues.

POSTS

TAGGED



On Tuesday, a group of anonymous Averett University students created an Instagram called “Au Garbage” in attempts to call the administration’s attention to maintenance issues on campus.

Contributed photo

Jones said the university was surprised and concerned by the appearance of the anonymous account, stating the campus is proud of its “open door policy.”

“We were very surprised they took to Instagram to do this as there were a number of other different ways,” she said.

She said students often walk into the offices of the president and deans, who are “committed to being open and hearing them.”

“We wanted to take immediate action,” said Jones. “Their concerns are our concerns.”

Of the photos posted on the anonymous Instagram account, entitled “Au garbage,” several drew attention to what they claimed to be mold growth in the bathrooms and dorms of residence halls.

Averett University Dean of Students Lesley Villarose responded to some of the posts on the Instagram account in attempts to learn more details about where the photos were taken and if they had been reported.

Jones said the university launched a new comprehensive work order system in August that provided regular status updates to students about their open tickets until they were closed. She said students at the meeting spoke positively of the system.

While not wanting to be identified, several current and former students affirmed to the Register & Bee issues with mold had existed at the university for the past few years.

The issue of mold growing in dorm rooms isn’t unique to Averett as students at other universities Western Kentucky University or University of Maryland have reported issues as well within the past year.

According to the Center for Disease Control, exposure to mold for long periods of time can cause runny noses in some and severe respiratory issues in others.

One student initially spoke on the record about an experience with mold in an apartment before retracting the comments, worried it would damage their relationship with the university.

In addition to Thursday's meeting, Jones said a group of administrators from different parts of campus "immediately assembled" to walk through the residence halls after the Instagram account was created to investigate some of the locations photographed.

Some of the images labeled mold by captions were found to be mildew or rust, she said. For others, they put in a work order. Residence hall directors were also sent to go through the entirety of the buildings and put reports in where necessary.

Jones said the university is aware of their residence halls are aging. Renovations are part of 10-year, \$20 million campaign. This summer they gutted and renovated Main Hall ahead of the fall semester.

"With older buildings come challenges," said Jones. "We recognize that, and we want to provide a safe secure and healthy environment."

She also said mold and infrastructure issues had been exacerbated after last year's record rainfall and damage from Tropical Storm Michael that caused some students to be relocated.

She said the school is still waiting on negotiations between the insurance company and general contractor to be complete so the remaining issues can be fixed.

Jones encouraged students to follow the university's motto, "If you see something, say something."

"We believe all students, faculty and staff have a responsibility to care for these facilities," she said. "If there's anything, you see facilities or otherwise report it."

Sister-run child care center's Pre-K accelerates academic, social progress while emphasizing spirituality

Halle Parker Jan 23, 2019



Sisters Mae Crews (left) and Emily Beard (right) smile at each other behind the administrative desk of the Harvest Corner Child Kare Center, a small day care center they founded together in 2008 after retiring from decades in the education field.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

Housed inside a small pink and purple building on the corner of Industrial Avenue and South Main Street, children as young as 2 years old are learning how to read years ahead of the average age.

The U.S. Department of Education suggests most children can read around 5 or 6.

At the Harvest Corner Child Kare Center, co-directors and sisters Mae Crews and Emily Beard said their pre-school program aims to provide children with a solid educational foundation and strong values in a nurturing environment.

“Our mission is to provide each youth with the essential skills ... necessary to live out God’s purpose or plan for their lives,” said Crews, as she sat in the day care’s administrative office.

The sisters founded the day care center in 2008 after they had both retired from decades in the education field, bringing a combined 80 to 85 years of experience as educators.

Both have worked in Danville and Pittsylvania County public schools. Crews also worked at Howard University and Old Dominion University; and Beard worked in North Carolina schools.

In that time, they noticed that children weren’t starting off with a quality foundation of values, saying there was “a great need.”

So, they decided to open the day care center to combine a rigorous academic program with self-empowerment through Christian values, becoming one of two black-owned child care centers in the city.

“We felt a call to try to make a difference,” said Crews.

By running a child care center, Beard said they’re able to “work with the whole child, not just academically but socially, spiritually and physically.”

Coming from humble beginnings themselves, Beard and Crews said their mother raised them on her own and credited their spirituality for their own success.

“With prayer and hard work, we are where we are today,” said Crews.

“And lots of encouragement and love,” Beard added, her eyes slightly crinkled with a warm smile.

“Yes, and that’s what we’re trying to do here,” Crews finished, with a smile of her own.

Harvest Corner offers a wide range of educational and child care services, from preschool to afterschool programs and tutoring. They also put on a six-week summer camp called Camp Self-Esteem with STEM that people travel from as far as north as Alexandria and as far south as Burlington, North Carolina, to attend.

Crews said families from Richmond have told her that “they have looked the city over, and they can’t find anybody that does what we do.”

Aside from Crews and Beard on the administrative side, the center is staffed by two full-time teachers.

The preschool program accepts ages 2 through 4 throughout the school year, taking a break during the summer. In combination with child care, those enrolled in the preschool program could stay at the center from 6:30 a.m. to around 5:30 p.m.

Janay Singletary, a single mother herself, said she’s enrolled the two of her three children in Harvest Corner after hearing about it from her sister and called their academic program “immaculate.”

“My oldest, she missed out,” said Singletary with a laugh.

Her son, now 5, just started kindergarten in Pittsylvania County Schools after going through the preschool program for two years, while her youngest daughter, 4, was enrolled last August.

“He’s one of the top in his class because of the structure in the program he was given at Harvest Corner,” Singletary said, noting that he scored in the top 10 percent on his assessment test a year before entering kindergarten.

Crews said they recognize that research shows around 85 percent of the brain develops by the time a child reaches 5 years old. This is a “critical time in their brain development,” she said.

Unlike in other settings where a child ahead in the curriculum may be pulled out, Crews said they continue to teach them on as high a grade level as they progress before leaving the program.

“We try to take advantage of that by teaching them as much as they’re capable of learning,” said Crews. This results in have 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds reading before kindergarten.

Beard said, “We have high expectations and know their needs. We’re trying to have them classroom-ready by the time they walk into kindergarten.”

As a shy kid, Singletary said the summer program also helped her son become more comfortable around other children.

“I can see it now especially since he’s in kindergarten,” she said.

For her daughter, Singletary said she appreciates the discipline and structure that the child care center gives her more defiant child.

“I appreciate that they’re trying to work with her now that way when she gets into the school system they don’t think she’s behind,” she said. “She was in a different day care, and they would just let her run wild.”

Singletary said she moved her daughter from a public preschool to Harvest Corner, and since then, she’s begun to see behavioral improvements.

Crews said they leave all the kids together regardless of age in the preschool program, and it plays a key role in their social development; the older children model the right behavior for the younger ones.

Both the afterschool program and Camp Self-Esteem allows children between 2 and 12. The summer camp runs all day five days a week for six weeks.

Beard and Crews said they’ve seen huge changes in the children who go through either program.

In both of them, they try to emphasize at a young age how their choices affect them and different options for the future. Crews said they include a career day element in the summer program every year.

“What we’re providing them will enable them to make wise choices,” said Beard.

This hit particularly close to home for Crews, who lost her son to gun violence. She said he was raised in a Christian home but started making some bad choices that eventually led him to his death.

Crews said, “We want them to have the knowledge of the fact that that route is not the only path they can take in life and be successful.”

They said one girl who went through the afterschool program is about to graduate from high school with honors, boasting over a 4.0 GPA. Before the program, they said her low self-esteem held her back academically and with her attitude.

“It was just about helping her to realize she was really capable of doing better,” said Crews.

Right now, the day care center serves 12 with their preschool program and seven in their afterschool program. They said they’re licensed to serve up to 27 children.

Crews said the registration process for all of their programs is ongoing, and they don’t require children to be screened before entering the preschool program.