

By ROB CHAPMAN

PRINCE EDWARD — The crowd had gone by 9:45 p.m. and the cleanup crews had diligently removed hundreds of white folding chairs from the closed-off Main Street.

The much-anticipated ceremony was over and soon the traffic would start to flow once again.

But all is not as it was. If a dawn can come at such an unusual hour, then one may have just come with the turning of a switch and a soft, yellow glow beaming from the top of Prince Edward County's courthouse.

It is to be a perpetual light of reconciliation.

Prince Edward has never been the same since 1959 when, mired in the throws of the state's track of massive resistance to integration, the County walked a now-acknowledged harmful road, choosing to close public schools.

Trapping souls in the pages of history somewhere between what is and what might have been.

But Monday's dusk ceremony — while acknowledging what has happened — was not so much about the past, but about the future.

About reconciling.

Building bridges.

Uniting a community.

On April 23, 1951, at a time when racially separate schools were the accepted norm across America, 16-year-old Barbara Johns and a group of Moton High School students marched from their school at the intersection of Griffin Boulevard and Main Streets to the superintendent's office in the courthouse—the same courthouse where the evening's program was being held—to protest separate but unequal schools.

That protest of facilities eventually found its way to the courts where the local case was wrapped into one of five that would become *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 ending segregation in public education.

Virginia's Constitution was amended to authorize the General Assembly and local governing bodies to appropriate funds to assist students to go to public or nonsectarian private schools.

Rather than integrate, Prince Edward—as did some other localities—closed public schools.

County supervisors approved a resolution earlier this month that recounts historical events and shines a light to the past and the future.

It reads, in part: *"...We...believe that the closing of public schools in our county from 1959 to 1964 was wrong; and we grieve for the way lives were forever changed, for the pain that was caused, and for how those locked doors shuttered opportunities and barricaded the dreams our children had for their own lifetimes; and for all wounds known and unknown; we regret those past actions..."*

Each of the board members present took turns reading the resolution, with Chairman William "Buckie" Fore culminating that the purpose of the light of reconciliation in the bell tower is "in honor of Barbara Rose Johns and the students of Robert Russa Moton High School and all the children of our county, for their historic role in ending public school segregation in the United States, with sorrow for closing schools; hoping that when we raise our eyes to see this light, may we also incline our hearts and minds to shine our own light of reconciliation toward all people."

"Prince Edward County cannot deny its past," Fore reflected. "We cannot. We should not try. I think we must embrace it and I think we must learn from it. Without that knowledge, we as a community risk repeating what earlier generations have paid so dearly to learn."

Fore also drawing from Abraham Lincoln, noted that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

"Each day, each of us must find the courage to challenge those who carry divisiveness and prejudice," he said. "Collectively, it will take courage from each of us to pass to the next generation a better community, a better school system, a better Prince Edward County and a better world, better than ones that we inherited."

What Does It Mean?

Though the schools closed 40 years ago, the ripple effect has reached beyond the local pond.

The evening's event was important enough for 84-year-old former Hampden-Sydney President and retired General Samuel V. Wilson to sit with coat and tie through the sweltering heat.

"With this, maybe we'll close the sad...chapter..." said Wilson.

And start a new one July 21, 2008. It is a chapter he wanted to see opened.

What happened here, Wilson highlights, didn't take place in a vacuum. As he served armed services around the world he was asked to explain.

"It's hard to have good answers to a bad situation," he concedes.

It was important enough for Martha Bailey Brown, in the seventh grade when schools closed, to drive down from Maryland with her son and video tape the events.

And important enough for Maurice and Beatrice Finney to come at 7 p.m., an hour before the scheduled start of the program, to secure front-row seats.

"It is great," Mrs. Finney says, when asked what the ceremony means to her. "Overdue. Real happy that we have come together as one."

One of many who was also impacted with the closing of the schools, she sees it as a new beginning and closure.

Why Now?

It has been a full day for many of those attending the event. Some had earlier traveled to Richmond to witness the dedication of the Virginia Civil Rights Memorial. Forty-nine years have passed since the schools were closed.

Prince Edward, however, wanted to do something on its own. Fore explained that the board thought it fitting that on the day the state dedicated the memorial on the grounds of the state capital, to "extend its aura and bring it home here to Prince Edward County."

He also credited *Herald* Editor Ken Woodley as one of the sparks that ignited the flame.

Speaker after speaker reflected on what the light of reconciliation means to them.

Woodley, who thanked the board for lighting the light and placing the words as a permanent marker and the administrative staff for embracing the project, offered reflections in a poem he had written, *Walking in the Footsteps of Light*.

"We have touched each other," Woodley read. "We have touched ourselves. Skin to skin. Life to life. Light to light."

Leslie Francis "Skip" Griffin Jr., eldest son of the late local civil rights leader L. Francis Griffin, was a sixth grade student when the schools closed.

"...Why not now?" Griffin asked. "Any moment in which God's children reach out to each other to try to reconcile with one another is...the right time. And I think it's incumbent upon all of us to embrace that moment. Reconciliation is never easy. It requires everyone to look into his or her heart and decide what kind of world is it that I want to live in, what kind of world is it that I'm willing to work for."

It's easy, Griffin also cited, to point to people who have hurt us, but he—drawing upon the Lord's Prayer—suggested those present to look into their hearts and think of a time when they had hurt someone "and what would it mean to you to have that person to forgive you."

All, he cited, were created in God's image. The image of God is not a physical image, Griffin explained, it is the ability to love, to reach out and touch one another and to connect with that which is basically human in all. It is about respect, he said, recognition of common humanity, ability to rise to heavens, but sometimes to fall and not be perfect and to ask for forgiveness and to be granted it.

"It is about accepting that we are all the result of God's unlimited love and his amazing grace. It is a process between people—a process that will proceed much better if we talk to one another as I and thou and not I and it or I and another," Griffin said.

Each of the speakers, their lives echoes of the past, offered words for the future.

Marcie Wall, the granddaughter of the late J. Barrye Wall, reflected on the changing times.

"What happened in 1959 split apart a community, this one," she said.

She also added, "And, like many families, this community had disagreements and, sometimes, even arguments, but it was a family. And it's becoming a family again."

Ms. Wall said she was overfilled with joy when she read of the coming of the light.

"I was proud for people, of the leaders in my hometown for stepping up and acting on their conviction," she said. "After all, in 1951, a group of black teenagers acted upon their convictions and changed the course of our nation."

Current school board chairman Russell Dove's life is one that rests on the dividing line in Prince Edward's history. Born in 1959, Dove didn't miss any school.

"To me, this light is a symbol that the current board of supervisors is officially recognizing that their counterparts in 1959 made a devastating error in judgment when they withheld the operating funds and locked the doors of the public schools," Dove assessed.

The light, Dove offered, will generate opportunities for good discussion for some, but for others it will serve as a reminder for a painful and shameful past.

He reflected on what the light cannot provide—recovering the years growing up in Rice without his eldest brother, who was forced to live with a cousin in northern Virginia. The light will not rewrite his elementary school years, which was shared with older classmates who lost years of instruction.

And then there's possibilities.

"Prince Edward has made progress over the years, but there is room for improvement and endless possibilities," he said.

One possibility, he suggested, would be to impact the future of the families of the victims of the school closing, which he suggested can be accomplished by addressing over representation of minority students in special education classes and in disciplinary and alternative school programs and under representation in the talented and gifted classes.

"I know, some will say, 'Russell those issues are true in many localities' and I would have to agree. However, I will remind you that unlike most localities, Prince Edward has previously acted in a manner that was indifferent," Dove said. "Prince Edward claimed its place in history when it left its public schools closed for five long years."

He suggested that the County could stake a new place in history to make a concerted effort to find solution to issues they still face.

"I foresee the possibility of enhanced degree of collaboration between the board of supervisors, the Town Council, school board, business community, the institutions of higher learning, the entire community," Dove said. "A level of collaboration that will exceed past commitments of those devoted to the cause of massive resistance."

Passing The Torch

As the day's events wound down, darkness soon engulfed the sunshine and streetlights began to come on.

Fore, on behalf of the board, encouraged those present to take the spirit and strength of the light of reconciliation home with them, to share it with families, friends and neighbors.

"On behalf of my family, I would like to thank Ken Woodley for all he has done for racial conciliation in this county and I would like to thank the board of supervisors," Joan John Cobbs, sister of the late Barbara Johns added in a spontaneous addition to the program. "I feel like this is a moment that I am experiencing in my lifetime and it's hard to believe, but I'm very grateful."

"And I want to say," Ms. Cobbs went on to add, "Barbara, this is for you."

She and Fore would also embrace.

As morning comes and the warm light of the sun, the Prince Edward County courthouse bell tower will never be in darkness, always lit with its perpetual light.

And serve as a metaphor that goes beyond a ceremony.

"Let us all shine our own light of reconciliation for all people and be a part of this great opportunity for the future of Prince Edward County," Fore encouraged.