

Volunteers to finish school's renovation

By Mary Gail Hare Sun Staff
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New hands-on museum could be ready by fall

A crew of building contractors and residents has volunteered to help create a museum out of a one-room schoolhouse, a century-old building that would showcase the efforts of African-American students in South Carroll.

The Sykesville Colored Schoolhouse, once the only classroom available to African-American families in southern Carroll and western Howard counties, could reopen as a hands-on museum this fall.

Pat Greenwald, a retired teacher and the town's schoolhouse coordinator, envisions "a functional schoolhouse," a field trip destination offering historical programs. Classes would emulate the era when one teacher taught as many as 50 students a year in five grades, but no one would have to trek down to the river for water or chop wood for the stove as the former students did for decades.

Plumbers, painters, carpenters and electricians - all volunteers - will soon set to work making the interior of the bright yellow clapboard building look nearly as it did when it opened in 1904. The 2004 version will have modern amenities, including a restroom, plumbing, heating and air conditioning, a new electrical system and handicap accessibility.

Charles A. Klein & Sons Inc., a mechanical contractor, was among the first to answer the call for volunteers from the town of Sykesville. The locally based company has donated a furnace and a heat pump and expects to secure plumbing fixtures. Its employees have volunteered to do the labor involved in installing ductwork and equipment. Rick Geelhaar, the company's facilities supervisor, estimates that the donation is in excess of \$7,000.

"We want to give something back to the community where we have done business for many years," he said.

Russ Arenz II, president of the Carroll County Landlords Association, will present the Town Council with a \$500 donation from the association at its meeting tomorrow.

"We want to show with good works that we care about this community," Arenz said.

The owner of Tilden Electric Co., Arenz will also rewire the schoolhouse, "restoring what is basically a shell to full service," Arenz said.

"This is really worthwhile," he said. "It is history."

Greenwald has a list of volunteer painters lined up for jobs this summer after most of the other work is done. She plans to take the schoolhouse back to its early 20th-century roots. She has located a potbelly stove and one student's desk that used to be bolted to the floor. A few more of those desks, a schoolmaster's table, a vintage globe and a 45-star flag would help complete the look, as would any vintage photos of the building and its students.

"I would love to have class photos, like when the teacher marched everyone outside on a sunny day for the school picture," Greenwald said. "Pictures like that would really get a dialogue going. We are trying to teach history here, and that includes the history of desegregation. There is a much greater impact when children discover these things naturally."

The museum will also need memories, she said.

Dana McCaulley, an anthropologist at Prince George's Community College and a Sykesville resident, is gathering an oral history from surviving alumni to donate to the project. Certain that many alumni are still in the area, Greenwald has scheduled a community meeting at 7 p.m. April 21 at the Town House to let everyone know what is going on and to help plan the grand opening.

"The people of this community have saved this building over and over," Greenwald said. "We want their input because they made this project happen."

The last class graduated from the schoolhouse in the late 1930s. Two alumni who met and later married at the school bought the building at an auction in 1939 and converted it into a home. Decades later, the building was abandoned, but the community always protected it.

In the past decade, the town has restored the schoolhouse's framed exterior, repaired the roof and stabilized the foundation. Officials will meet this week with contractors and review plans for the building's interior.

"These people are making a huge contribution to this project," said Matthew Candland, town manager. "I think they realize that this is really a public benefit for the entire county."

The town has some money left from a \$32,000 Maryland Historic Trust grant that will pay for the excavating and the exterior utility work that is expected to begin within the next few weeks. The work will leave a flat, grassy area ideal for picnic tables, if anyone has one to spare, Greenwald said.

Candland said he is hopeful that Carroll County will waive water and sewer hook-up fees. The town will then pay to lay the pipelines.

In addition to the landlord association's donation, the Johns Hopkins University/Applied Physics Lab Women's Network will give the project the proceeds from its spring social - a barn dance and white elephant auction at Greenwald's barn, just outside town. Those funds will go to furnishings for the schoolhouse.

"It looks like everything is falling into place," Greenwald said. "It really sounds like we will be able to open in the fall, thanks to a lot of committed, reliable people."