



'Walking Through the Door Again'

The Story of Hockessin Colored School #107c

It all began with a serendipitous phone call in early January 2012 from The Hon. Joshua W. Martin III (who also happens to be one of my favorite people in life!). He was calling to see if I might be willing to provide some real estate insights to a group of community volunteers who were trying to save the Hockessin Colored School #107c from sheriff's sale. Time was of the essence as a sheriff's sale had already been scheduled for January 10.

107c's Monumental History

107c was at the center of the 1952 Delaware court case known as *Bulah v. Gebhart*. At that time, segregation prevented Black and white students from riding the same bus or attending the same

schools. In 1950, Sarah and Fred Bulah became frustrated that a school bus, which passed their house every day on the way to the all-white school Hockessin #29, would not pick up their daughter Shirley and drop her off at 107c.



After writing letters to the Governor, and not getting anywhere, Ms. Bulah approached Louis Redding, Delaware's first African American attorney, to help with her daughter's transportation. Attorney Redding was more frustrated with the unequal access to education than the bus situation and said he would only take on the case if the Bulahs sought Shirley's admission to #29. Little did they know they would change a nation and make 107c a pivotal part of history.

Bulah v. Gebhart would be combined with four other cases to become

the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The ruling in *Bulah/Belton* ended segregation in education in Delaware in 1952, two years before *Brown*, and paved the way for ending segregation in America. Delaware's Supreme Court was the only State in *Brown* to affirm the lower court ruling ending segregation prior to the U.S. Supreme Court 9-0 decision.

Early Stage: Activating the FOHCS and Developing a Strategic Plan

Starting in January 2012, a series

of meetings was held at the offices of the Delaware Community Foundation (DCF) by a new nonprofit entity, The Friends of Hockessin Colored School 107, Inc. (FOHCS). The meetings' goal was to formulate a plan to acquire the mechanic's lien from the contractor, Petrucon — which was trying to execute on collection of their construction debt from the Hockessin Community Center (HCC) — and avoid the sheriff's sale and losing the five-acre residentially zoned property in Hockessin to development. Leaders of FOHCS included the late Hon. Leonard Williams, Delaware Supreme Court Chief Justice Collins J. Seitz, Jr., Dick Christopher, Allison Levine, Fred Sears, William Allen, Dr. Tony Allen, Drewry Fennell, Sylvia Banks, Sherese Brewington-Carr, Joshua W. Martin III and Cynthia Primo Martin. DCF was the fundraising partner.

The following quote from Judge Leonard Williams summarizes the tenor of the moment: "We could no more let HCS #107 be torn down or lost to commercial development, than we could allow another promising student of color to drop out of high school based on some artificial barrier of geography, income or perceived cultural deficiency."

These meetings were quickly followed by a flurry of efforts to raise at least \$225,000. In a matter of days, over 75% of the funds to save the 107c from sheriff's sale were obtained from DCF's African American Empowerment Fund (AAEF), led by Chair William Allen, and from Dick Christopher (as an individual). DCF raised the remaining funds from FOHCS and DCF members, friends and family. At this point, I was asked to join the FOHCS Board and soon thereafter served as Chair for the next 10 years.

With committed funds, FOHCS was able to negotiate a postponement of the sheriff's sale by purchasing the mechanic's lien from Petrucon. The lien purchase

was finalized in early 2012. During this time, there was litigation with the HCC in the Court of Chancery pertaining to governance-related questions. Once that litigation was resolved, FOHCS and HCC were able to effectuate an amicable future property transfer.

While monitoring the Chancery Court litigation with HCC to effectuate the property transfer, FOHCS began developing a strategic plan for re-imagining and funding 107c. Knowing 107c's "game-changing" role in our country's history, it became clearly evident that 107c was much more than just a piece of well-located real estate in Hockessin. As if 107c's history wasn't enough, even more incredible was discovering there were former students still alive who had attended 107c in the 1920s, '30s, '40s and '50s. Meeting the former students and their "Inspirer-in-Chief", Sonny Knott, changed everything. At this point, FOHCS's strategy evolved from a real estate-focused mission to highlighting the memories and experiences of the former students as the real inspiration behind future programming.

Post Sheriff's Sale — 'Wandering through the Desert'

FOHCS spent the "post-sheriff's-sale" period testing future possibilities for programming at 107c, with an emphasis on its history, capturing the former students' memories, maximizing its future community impact, and completing the property transfer from HCC. On June 30, 2015, FOHCS closed on an amicable transfer of the property. This began an extended period of conversations with key stakeholders around what we should do with this priceless community asset for maximum benefit and impact.

The first challenge post-closing was what to do with a partially completed addition that would require \$750,000+ to finish. After extensive deliberations, the

FOHCS Board decided that with NCC building code violations, a lack of funds to finish, and lack of a compelling "ask," the 80% unfinished addition should be demolished and the back wall stabilized, to preserve as much of the original structure as possible. FOHCS obtained a grant from the Laffey-McHugh Foundation for a demo contractor to remove the addition and stabilize the building.

During the balance of 2015 and 2016, FOHCS worked with Kevin Wilson, AIA from the Architectural Alliance, Lou Rosenberg from Mitchell Associates, and Stephen Mockbee from Bancroft Construction (all *pro bono*) to create a preliminary conceptual plan and budget for re-imagining the property. We also began sharing our conceptual plan to transform the school into a "Community Hub and Educational Innovation Center" with multiple stakeholder groups to gauge their interest in partnering. Despite a number of positive initial responses, in late 2017, nothing firm had materialized that met the feasibility test for fundraising and certainty of execution.

In mid-2018, FOHCS was approached by Dr. Gina Harrison, owner of Lane PreSchool, who was interested in purchasing the property and redeveloping it into a preschool and early childhood educational center. The Board saw this opportunity as a way for the school to be used for future educational purposes, with sales proceeds used to repay the AAEF and Dick Christopher. Unfortunately, after several months of positive progress, on December 6, 2018, FOHCS received notice from Dr. Harrison that due to serious personal health issues, she was withdrawing the offer to purchase the property.

This sequence of frustrating activities led to very stressful moments and fomented doubt from the Board about whether we would ever "stop wandering in the desert and reach the promised land" with 107c.

So at the end of 2018, and into early 2019, there was enormous pressure to 1) rise above an "ever more doubting" FOHCS Board; 2) not disappoint our lenders, who were losing faith that we could repay their loans; and 3) not let the former students down and pray they would live long enough to see 107c brought back to life.

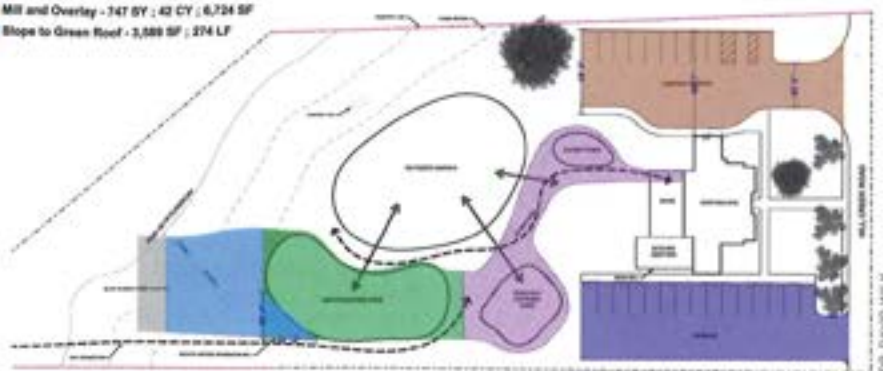
The 'Hundred and First Blow'

Magically, in mid-January 2019, FOHCS Board member Bill Allen was contacted by Cheryl Corn and Dennee Crumrine of the Delaware State Chamber of Commerce (DSCC) with incredible news. Through the confluence of Joshua and Cynthia Martin being awarded the Marvel Cup in 2019, DSCC informed us that they had hired John Sweeney, former editor of the *News Journal*, to write a feature article on 107c for their May/June *Delaware Business Magazine* "Superstars in Education" issue. This amazing gesture by DSCC became the "ideal catalyst" for our mission, and we gained priceless visibility and credibility at a time when we could not have needed it more.

The DSCC article was planned for publication in May 2019, so we worked to solidify our efforts to optimize the property's future use by focusing on 107c's history and the former students led by Sonny Knott. This direction became the real "wow" and created an ideal "hook" to expand the impact of our programming around enhancing cultural competency, fostering safe conversations around contemporary social issues, and creating innovative social infrastructure strategies.

Thankfully, after years of study, disappointments and refinement, the FOHCS Board unanimously approved a plan to transform 107c into a Center for Diversity, Inclusion, and Social Equity (CDISE) in late 2019. This branding and programming direction received very positive reactions from New Castle

- Fence - Around Site - 7 1/2" - 495 LF
- Pavement - 8" / 3" / 2" - Phase 1A - 709 SF ; 256 CY ; 6,384 SF
- Covered Path - 5,219 SF ; 454 LF
- Green Roof - 5,593 SF ; 343 LF
- Wheel Stop - 15 EA
- Mill and Overlay - 747 SF ; 42 CY ; 6,724 SF
- Slope to Green Roof - 3,589 SF ; 274 LF



HOCKESSIN COLORED SCHOOL #107
SITE PLAN CONCEPT DIAGRAM
1/12" = 1'-0"

Introduced by: Mr. Sheldon,
Mr. Woods,
Ms. Kilpatrick,
Mr. Hollins,
Mr. Street

Date of introduction: July 28, 2020

RESOLUTION NO. 20-161

AUTHORIZING THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE TO EXECUTE THE MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING CONCERNING THE ACQUISITION, PRESERVATION AND FUTURE USE OF HOCKESSIN COLORED SCHOOL #107 AS A PERMANENT CENTER FOR DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND SOCIAL EQUITY

County (NCC) leadership, funders and community leaders, giving us renewed confidence that we had chosen a good direction for 107c. As 2019 drew to a close, we were very excited about the CDISE, but had no idea what was in store for our country in 2020.

2020 — The Year of 107c's 'Heartbreaking Validation'

FOHCS had just approved the CDISE, when events in 2020 (George Floyd, Black Lives Matter, Breonna Taylor) sadly validated that the Center was the perfect impact and value-add strategy for 107c. These terrible events underscored the need for improved

human relations and greater social equity, and they further energized our motivation and commitment to 107c's future.

FOHCS entered into a partnership agreement with NCC during early 2020 and NCC Resolution #20-161 was unanimously approved in June 2020 (see above).

A signing ceremony was held at 107c in August 2020 and 107c became the 250th NCC Park, with NCC providing \$172,000 in capital to pay off the AAEF and Dick Christopher. The partnership with NCC and achieving this repayment milestone in late 2020 was one of FOHCS's greatest moments and emotional springboards.

The signing ceremony was serendipitously attended by Dr. Ray Blackwell, chief of cardiac surgery at ChristianaCare (who saved my mother-in-law's life in 2007) and Dr. Lanette Edwards (whom I met on a school field trip with our daughters in 2011). After one conversation with each of them, and realizing the depth of their connection to 107c, it became clear that Drs. Edwards and Blackwell were ideal future Board members. Both were elected to the Board in the fall of 2020.

Execution of the Redevelopment Plan for 107c

In January 2021, or nine years after saving 107c from sheriff's sale, FOHCS was able to move forward on architectural and engineering work on 107c, thanks to critical grant funding from Secretary Jeffrey W. Bullock at the Delaware Department of State.

Also in 2021, Dr. Blackwell suggested that FOHCS begin a tradition of having an Annual *Brown v. Board of Education Day*. This idea became a reality when Gov. John Carney and the State Legislature declared May 17, 2021 "Brown v. Board of Education Day" in Delaware. The highlight of the first *Brown v. Board of Education Day* were the emotional words of Sonny Knott, who tearfully said "we're walking through the door again."

FOHCS spent 2021 in major fundraising mode and received grants from the State of Delaware Bond Bill Committee and the Longwood Foundation to build further momentum. We also completed a competitive bidding process for construction and selected EDiS Company, based on their lowest price and highest percentage of minority participation.

Details on the Redevelopment Plan for 107c

The redevelopment plan consisted of adding a small addition (6' by 44') to the back of the existing building and



Breaking ground on the redevelopment of 107c in 2021

transforming it into a multi-purpose facility containing 2,500+ square feet of space. FOHCS ceremonially broke ground on the redevelopment of 107c on December 14, 2021, with Gov. John Carney officiating the ceremony. A building permit was issued in January 2022.

In March 2022, thanks to the incredible efforts of U.S. Sen. Tom Carper, U.S. Sen. Chris Coons and U.S. Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester, the CDISE was awarded a grant from Congress (through the Department of Housing and Urban Development). This was the final piece of funding we needed to get the former 107c students to "walk through the door again." Needless to say, FOHCS was ecstatic.

From the Schoolhouse to the White House

While the building was under construction, Congress passed Senate Bill 270 designating 107c as a National Park Service historical site under *Brown*. This major highlight of our mission was commemorated by six former 107c students visiting the Oval Office for the bill signing on May 12, 2022 with President Joe Biden.

The following quote from former 107c student and FOHCS Board Member Sonny Knott captures the emotion of the moment: "I truly do not have the words for how my heart feels in regards to the school becoming part of the National Park Service. The school is very, very dear to us older students that went there."

Telling the Story of 107c for Future Generations

Although we had spent lots of time reimagining the school into the CDISE, FOHCS realized the true magic of 107c is the students and families who lived the experience, because we had the privilege of getting to know them and learn from their memories and stories. Since 107c as a building had authenticity, we also had to create a plan to "tell the story" and create the full experience by focusing on the storytelling component. This effort was led by Lou Rosenberg and his team at Mitchell Associates on the technical and creative side, and Dr. Lanette Edwards and her team on the historical, former students and community side. Dr. Edwards, Rosenberg and their team members engaged with Hilda Bulah-Morris (oldest living student from 107c and Shirley's niece), Sonny Knott, as

well as other former students and their families, to research, curate and collect artifacts, memorabilia and photos for storytelling panels, displays, furniture and fixtures, and the overall experiential feel of the CDISE. Most amazingly, the team was able to get the names of every student who went to 107c from the 1920s to the 1950s on panels.

Grand Opening and Ribbon Cutting

The culmination of 107c's journey was on December 14, 2022, when former students "cut the ribbon" on reopening their school (CDISE) and "walked through the door again." Gov. John Carney officiated, was brought to tears by the enormity of the joy and gratitude from the students, and said he was "blown away" by the design and feel of the CDISE.

Programming, Impact and Outcomes Since Opening

The CDISE opened in January 2023, featuring programs designed to support schools, universities, governments, public and private enterprises, and nonprofit organizations with the tools and knowledge to promote innovation in diversity, social equity, inclusive prosperity, cultural competency and social infrastructure. Programming activities at CDISE have included:

- 1) Bringing the history of 107c to Delaware school children and history curriculum.
- 2) Delivering programs that advance cultural competency and inclusive prosperity.
- 3) Being a "safe" place for community conversations about contemporary social issues, inspired by the historic role of 107c in ending school desegregation.
- 4) Developing social infrastructure strategies that encompass education, healthcare, affordable housing, social justice, workforce development and human flourishing.

5) Advancing innovation, infrastructure and inclusion strategies that lead to optimization of real estate, people (human capital) and places (i3o).

Since the CDISE's opening, programming has provided over 40 events and hosted over 1,500 community members. 107c has received awards and recognition from The Links Incorporated 75th Anniversary Honorees, Delaware Contractors Association, Associated Builders and Contractors, Temple University, and NeighborGood Partners. FOHCS also celebrated Hilda Bulah-Morris's 100th birthday in July 2023 with an Ice Cream Social.

Final Takeaways and Lessons Learned — From Our '12-Year Overnight Success'

Most Delawareans do not know and never learned about the monumental role Delaware played in being the first state to end school segregation in 1952, two years ahead of *Brown*. Most also don't realize 107c is in their backyard, and that "but for Bulah," the U.S. Supreme Court decision unanimously declaring school segregation unconstitutional may not have been heard.

The courage that it took for Fred and Sarah Bulah and Attorney Louis Redding to fight Jim Crow laws in the 1950s, at a time when both Blacks and whites did not want to "stir up trouble," is legendary. The former students recounted how the Bulahs were severely impacted by their actions in both the Black and white communities.

The courage that it took for Chancellor Collins J. Seitz to rule that 107c and #29 were not "separate but equal" was also legendary for a young white judge in 1952. Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr. wrote in 1995 for the *Villanova Law School Review* Volume 40, Issue 3, an article entitled "The Courage of Collins Seitz." He wrote: "We cannot know how influential Judge Seitz's views were in bringing

the Court to its unanimous result in *Brown*; we can only feel assured that they played a persuasive role. There can be no doubt, however, that Collins Seitz's acts of courage provided a critical foundation for the further realization of the equal protection guarantees of our Constitution."¹

We want to express our incredible gratitude to President Joe Biden, Senators Tom Carper and Chris Coons, U.S. Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester, Gov. John Carney, Secretary of State Jeff Bullock, NCC Executive Matt Mayer and NCC Chief Administrative Officer Vanessa Phillips, the Longwood Foundation, the Laffey-McHugh Foundation, the Welfare Foundation, Artesian Water, and everyone else in the community who has contributed to the 107c mission so far. We can't wait to see what happens from here.

To be able to take a place in Hockessin that means so much to our nation's history, having the privilege of delivering this hallowed place back to the former students, their families and the community at large, and presenting programs that will motivate people to be more inclusive and accepting of others

who are different than they are, is one of the greatest blessings any of us could ever have in our lifetimes. The following quote from Lewis Carroll summarizes our feelings: "One of the deep secrets in life is that all that is worth doing is what we do for others."

FOHCS has dedicated our efforts to ensure the 107c CDISE delivers value, impact and inspiration to the community, as its history so richly deserves. Although DEI has become much more controversial than when we launched CDISE, we have multiple value propositions that have come out of our journey, and we are only starting to get warmed up.

For those who are interested in participating in our future impact and value creation activities, we welcome you with open arms because:

"Like a snowball rolling down the side of a snow-covered hill, it's growing." (The Temptations, 1965) ♦

NOTES

1. <https://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/vlr/vol40/iss3/2>



Hilda Bulah-Morris's 100th birthday Ice Cream Social