‘Left Out Of History’

1951 Farmville Protest Led By High-Schoolers

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By AMELIA BRUST

FARMVILLE — In 1951, Barbara Rose Johns was a 16-year-old junior at the all-black Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville. Like many segregated schools of the era, Moton was inferior to the schools attended by white children.

It lacked a separate gymnasium, cafeteria and infirmary. The school held almost 400 students despite its nearly 150-capacity design, and as Johns’ sister, Joan Johns Cobbs, 76, recalled to a group of visiting Rockingham County high-schoolers at the Robert Russa Moton Museum Thursday, the only relief came from cheaply made “tar paper shacks” with leaking roofs, forcing students to hold umbrellas.

The inequity stirred Johns and her classmates to act. On April 23, 1951, after tricking the school’s principal to track down students supposedly making trouble in town, Johns took the stage of the auditorium.

“I didn’t know what she was going to say,” Cobbs, then 13, said. “And the more [her sister] talked,” the more afraid she became.

Johns, the niece of Vernon Johns, a pastor at Montgomery, Ala.’s Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and considered by some as “the father of the civil rights movement,” led a strike out of the building. The students’ demand: better resources from the Prince Edward County School Board.

Despite her fear of repercussions, Cobbs followed her sister.

FROM LEFT: East Rockingham High School juniors Gabrielle Sean, Travis Cubbage, Jordan Secrets, Patrick Nott and Caleb Thompson lead a re-enactment Thursday of the day Barbara Johns, a 16-year-old student at the all-black Robert Russa Moton High School in Farmville, organized a student protest 64 years earlier. The students stood on the same stage as Johns in a building that’s now a museum. (Photos by Nikki Fox)

Moton’s Legacy

The students' two-week strike at Moton became a civil rights turning point. Three years later, the students' case became part of the landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kan., case, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1954 legally ended racial segregation in schools.

Johns, who died in 1991, was remembered on Thursday, when 31 Rockingham County students retraced the steps Johns and other civil rights movement veterans took.

The students visited the former school, now a National Historic Landmark and home to the Robert Russa Moton Museum. They also went to the church, where the activists congregated, and the Prince Edward County Courthouse, where desegregation was resisted for 10 years following the Supreme Court's decision.

From one stop to the next, the high-schoolers acted as tour guides, presenting their research to Cobbs, her sister-in-law and a former Moton High School teacher Patsy Cobbs Franklin, and former Moton student Robert Hamlin.

Beau Dickenson, coordinator of social studies for Rockingham County Public Schools, organized the trip to give students the chance to "experience" history.

Joan Johns Cobb of New Jersey, whose sister organized a student strike on April 23, 1951, at the high school in Farmville, watches the re-enactment.

Left Wanting More

A year ago, Cobbs and former Moton students Joy Cabarrus Speakes and the Rev. J. Samuel Williams spoke at Turner Ashby High School, and Dickenson said they left an impression.

"Joan said it would be great to bring students down to the museum," he said. "It started as a project with the [Spotswood High School] Social Studies National Honors Society club. … We had some solid student interest there, but we thought it could be bigger."

"I think it forces you to get the full experience," said SHS senior Connor Houlbrooke, 18, a member of the club.

Fellow member Sara Martin, 18, also a senior at Spotswood, said she did not talk much about the civil rights movement in her AP history class last year, so this was a way to “fill in the gaps.”

“It just seemed like an opportunity to do something hands-on so close to where we lived,” said Brooke McGloon, 18, another Spotswood senior. Her research involved calling Cobbs directly, which she admitted was a bit nerve-racking.

“She, in my eyes, is a famous person,” McGloon said.

Since the death of her sister, Cobbs has had to put herself in the public eye to keep Johns’ legacy alive. Though not as outspoken as she said her sister was, Cobbs thinks she’s gotten more comfortable with the role.

“At first, it was so emotional to go back to those times,” she said, commending the students for their research and their enthusiasm in the project. “It brought a lot of stuff back to mind.”

Reliving History

Speaking from the Moton school’s stage Thursday, East Rockingham High School students re-enacted Johns’ rallying call for her classmates to walk out of school on strike.

Later, the group traveled to the First Baptist Church of Farmville. That’s where the Moton students in 1951 met with NAACP attorneys Spottswood Robinson and Oliver Hill, who filed Dorothy E. Davis et al v. County School Board of Prince Edward County.

“There were no paradigm cases to pull from. They really were blazing a trail,” Houlbrooke said of the attorneys’ challenge to the “separate but equal” standard created by the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson U.S. Supreme Court case.

Davis v. County School Board, as it was also known, was one of five lower court cases eventually incorporated into the Brown v. Board of Education. The other

LEFT TO RIGHT: Turner Ashby High School students junior Rachel Aidukaitis, 16, junior Taylor Metzler, 17, and senior Kylie Britt, 17, stand in front of the Confederate Monument in downtown Farmville and give a presentation about massive resistance.

cases originated from South Carolina, Washington, D.C., Kansas and Delaware.

“Brown v. Board was a class action suit with mostly parent-led initiatives. In Farmville, it was the students themselves,” Dickenson said.

Despite the ruling, in 1956 some of the commonwealth’s lawmakers, led by U.S. Sen. Harry Byrd Sr., called for a series of state laws collectively known as “massive resistance” to prevent desegregation, according to Humanities magazine, a publication of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

The Prince Edward County School Board voted in 1959 to close its schools rather than integrate, and private all-white schools were established with the help of state tuition grants and county tax credits.

But when the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed the grants in 1964, the division reopened with integrated schools, according to the Virginia Historical Society.

Standing at the foot of Farmville’s Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberty statue on Thursday, Taylor Metzler, Rachel Aidukaitis and Kylie Britt from Turner Ashby High School addressed the effects of massive resistance, as well the risks residents faced for opposing segregation.

Metzler described the threats of lynching and the burning cross left on the Johns family’s yard. Next to her, Aidukaitis held a sign in the wind that read in black marker, “I have lost four years of education. Why five?”

Rockingham County high school students visit the grave of Vernon Johns, often called the father of the civil rights movement, during a trip to Farmville on Thursday.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Spotswood High School seniors Connor Houlbrooke, 18, Christiane Mushagasha, 17, and Sara Martin, 18, discuss the decision to sue the Prince Edward County School Board on behalf of the Moton High School students in the basement of the historic First Baptist Church in downtown Farmville.

Spreading The Word

“It’s quite an amazing story. I really feel like Virginia got left out of history,” said Dickenson. Both the field trip and last year’s speaker visit were funded by Rockingham Educational Foundation Inc. grants.

“We’re hoping that this will inspire other school systems,” said Justin Reid, acting director of the museum and associate director of museum operations. “It’s the type of learning that we want 21st century students to do.”

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