

A GATEWAY TO SUCCESS

Dunbar High was more than just a school, it was a community

Former students of Clay's only all-Black high school reminisce, preserve history

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GREEN COVE SPRINGS — Dunbar High was more than just a school.

It was a place where community lived effortlessly. Where every student was known by name and every experience was marked with a memory.

Its students remember it as somewhere they could go to not only receive an educa-

tion but forge a well-lit path of perseverance. That's why they said it's imperative to keep its vast history alive.

The first step to making sure any part of history is remembered is to continue telling its story. A group of former students did just that when they met to proudly share their memories on Tuesday.

As a part of the Green Cove Springs Preservation Society's Speaker Series, the program, held at the Village Improvement Association, aimed to bring Dunbar's story to life through the people that knew it closely.

SEE DUNBAR, 10



Left to Right: Kenneth E. Francis, Class of 1965; Evelyn Battle Francis, attended through 1967 in 11th grade; Betty Robinson Demmons, Class of 1959; Henrietta Davis Francis, Class of 1966; Doris Franklin Jordan, Class of 1963; Lucille Johnson DeVeaux, attended through 1967 in 11th grade; Dr. Larry T. Richardson, Class of 1965; Linda Francis Gibson, attended through 1967 in 11th grade; and Velma Lewis Zeigler, Class of 1966.

Many former students of Dunbar High attended the Speaker Series on Tuesday.

Dunbar

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The monthly events bring historians, authors, preservationists and local residents together to explore the buildings, people and events that shaped Green Cove Springs and Clay County. President Sandra Dunnivant said proceeds benefit the restoration and future community use of the historic Rivers House on Spring Street.

Betty Demmons of the Dunbar Alumni Association, former Green Cove Springs Mayor Felecia Hampshire, Henrietta Fran-

cis of the Augusta Savage Mentoring Center and former Green Cove Springs Junior High and R.C. Bannerman Learning Center Principal Kenneth Francis gave insightful presentations to an engrossed audience, divulging the impact that the school had and continues to have on the local community.

Dunbar High, located where the Augusta Savage Arts and Community Center now sits on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, was the county's only all-Black high school built in 1942.

The school helped to alleviate the lack of educational opportunities for Black children as segregation laws at the time

separated Black students from White students.

Students commuted daily to Dunbar by bus from Penney Farms, Middleburg, Doctors Inlet and Hibernia. It had just 350 students, 14 teachers, one principal, one part-time librarian, a part-time counselor, four lunchroom workers, two custodians and five bus drivers.

Demmons attended the school from 1947 to 1959. She recalled that even with the school's lack of access to resources, its teachers and faculty always found ways to help students flourish. The close relationships, elaborate parades that often had crowds lining the streets and fancy proms made the school what it was.

"Dunbar was a family," she said.

With both her parents attending the school, Hampshire said there was never a moment when she wasn't involved with Dunbar growing up.

At just five years old, she said her mother would proudly dress her up to participate with the school's marching band.

"That moment stayed with me forever, even until now," she said.

Growing up in Green Cove Springs, she said she walked by the school almost every day. When it lit up at night, her young eyes thought of it as a palace. Another world she couldn't wait to be a part of.

"I'd look at it and think, one day, I'm going to go to high school there."

But after her first year at Charles E. Bennett, Hampshire said schools in Clay were integrated. And with that, Dunbar officially closed after its last graduating class of 1967.

It's junior-year students were then

transferred to Clay High and Orange Park High.

Years later, it was reopened as community center in 2021. Since then, the facility has continued to provide youth-based after-school programs, mentorship opportunities and arts and education.

It's now become a community hub, Henrietta said, also hosting the Green Cove Springs Food Pantry, AML Kids, and renovated Thomas Hogans gym.

"All of these resources have helped transform the former school into a place where families gather, children play and organizations meet local needs," she said.

As the last speaker of the evening, Kenneth rounded out the presentation with a look into just how the school produced success in all of its students.

Another Dunbar graduate and community activist, his history lies deep in Green Cove Springs. In 1968, Francis became the first appointed Black principal in the Clay County school system.

As principal of Green Cove Spring Junior High, he ushered in many new changes to create an "oasis of learning" — which resulted in it becoming a top-performing school in the county.

"Those experiences that I had from Dunbar, led into my mentorship and my expectations as a principal," Kenneth said.

Moving forward, the Preservation Society said it hopes help keep stories like these from being forgotten. To all of its students, Dunbar was more than just a building. Inside its four walls lived a mountain of rich history.

And although small, it was a mighty gateway to success.