

EXHIBIT HIGHLIGHTS BLACK HISTORY AT SIMMS SCHOOL

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Kailyn Gilliam (right), a junior at James Madison University, speaks Wednesday during a preview of an exhibit on prominent black residents of Harrisonburg at Roop Hall. The upcoming permanent exhibit will be at the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center in Harrisonburg. (Photo by Austin Bachand / DN-R)

HARRISONBURG — History is anything but lacking throughout the halls of the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center.

Since it opened as a school for black students in 1938, hundreds of students and community members have left their mark on the building, located at 620 Simms Ave.

Now, much of that history is coming to life with an exhibit that illustrates 150 years of black history, beginning soon after the Civil War.

The exhibit is a yearlong project created by several James Madison University students and their two advisers, Sean McCarthy and Mollie Godfrey. It wraps around both sides of the center's main hallway and will officially open on Monday.

Remembering Lucy F. Simms

The center, formerly known as the Lucy F. Simms School, was named after a longtime Valley educator who was born into slavery in 1855. In 1877, Simms

graduated from the Hampton Institute and began teaching in Harrisonburg and Rockingham County.

Throughout her teaching career, which spanned 56 years, she taught more than 1,800 students. The Lucy F. Simms School served black children until desegregation in 1965.

The school's building came under city control on Aug. 31, 2001. It then underwent a two-year, \$5.5 million renovation project and reopened on May 20, 2005.

Now, the Lucy F. Simms Continuing Education Center serves as a community center. It is also the home of the Arc of Harrisonburg and Rockingham, which supports those with disabilities, and the headquarters of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County.

Exhibit's Features

The exhibit tells more than Simms' story.

Its 59 panels and 100 photos also honor others who contributed to the school's history, said Robin Lyttle of the Shenandoah Valley Black Heritage Project.

"What's so great about this exhibition is that it's not just about Lucy F. Simms, who we adore and love," Lyttle said.

The exhibit, which is more than 100 feet long, is divided into six sections: early education in Harrisonburg; Simms and her legacy; community life; the school's extracurricular activities; school life; and after the school became inactive.

"It really hits it all," Lyttle said.

The exhibit, along with interactive features and videos, will be on a website, which McCarthy said will launch next week.

Going Beyond A Textbook

With the exhibit's creation were some challenges, one being the amount of research required. Much history was lost after the school closed in 1964.

"It's like going to the bottom of the ocean to find a new species, because much of this information hasn't been discovered," Lyttle said.

Juniors Brett Seekford and Hannah Jones spent hours poring over information at the Massanutten Regional Library Central Branch for the project.

Seekford said some of the information uncovered conflicted with what community members said happened.

“We often went with the community’s word,” he said. “It was tricky to find the real history.”

McCarthy said the team also collected pictures from members of the community. With that came another set of difficulties.

“There was a lot of work trying to figure out what these photographs are,” said McCarthy, who added that the team also needed to verify each photo’s subjects.

Seekford said the project was different from anything he had done before.

“It was just a culture shock. The stuff you learn in high school I got first world experience through this project,” Seekford said. “[Speaking with community members] is so much different from reading a textbook.”

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