

PROJECT HORSESHOE FARM MAKES STRIDES IN BUILDING COMMUNITY HEALTH IN GREENSBORO

ELLA PAINTER ALM COMMUNICATIONS INTERN

On main street in downtown Greensboro, an inviting three-story hotel beckons to passersby. The Horseshoe Farm community center, also known by some locals as the Old Greensboro Hotel, has taken on a new life after being rescued from disrepair by Project Horseshoe Farm, a nonprofit focused on supporting community health. Today, the once dilapidated building, which was featured on the Alabama Historical Commission's "Places in Peril" list, plays an influential role in rebuilding a rural Black Belt city, from the inside out.

After stepping inside, visitors find light-filled rooms bustling with laughter as community members chat over lunch and make arts and crafts together. Meanwhile, a group of fellows, the nonprofit's volunteers and potential medical and graduate school students, float around the kitchen as they tidy up and prepare for the afternoon's programming.

Dr. John Dorsey, a California native and psychiatrist, founded Project Horseshoe Farm with the mission of promoting the health of rural communities, both physically and socially. Dr. Dorsey's inspiration for the program formed during his community psychiatric residency at University of California Davis Medical Center, where he discovered that a piece of the puzzle was missing for both patients and medical professionals.

"It really dawned on me that the types of patients we were taking care of in community psychiatry settings, including those struggling with mental illness, relationship challenges, histories of abuse, and multiple chronic illnesses really had a lot more in common with the patients we were taking care of in most medical settings," Dr. Dorsey said.

This realization formed the seeds of Project Horseshoe Farm. Dr. Dorsey moved to Alabama in 2005, searching for a more intimate community to practice and live in. He began his time in the state with intentions of working at one of Alabama's two psychiatric hospitals, Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa. However, he was informed on his trip across country that the hospital no longer needed his services. Jobless and directionless, he was fortunate to stumble upon Greensboro.

After spending his first two years settling in and getting to know the community, the beginnings of the project

formed with an after-school youth program in 2007. After this small start, the program has since expanded to offer three more programs to different groups of vulnerable community members, ensuring no one in Greensboro is left behind. Its other programs include: the health partners; community center; and housing and nursing home programs.

Today, Project Horseshoe Farm has expanded its scope and has two other sites, one in Perry County, Alabama, and one in Pomona, California. These sites offer similar services to the original Greensboro site and work to improve the health of their communities.

Community Health Gap Year Fellowship

A major aspect of Project Horseshoe Farm is the partnership it has with college students interested in attending medical or graduate school after a gap year, a break taken after completing undergraduate school. The nonprofit's "Community Health Gap Year Fellowship" application process is extremely competitive, attracting interest from graduates nationwide. Once selected, fellows begin the year-long program each June and live in housing provided by Project Horseshoe Farm.

Locals eagerly await the arrival of the new batch of fellows each summer, and the local newspaper, The Greensboro Watchman, even publishes a short bio about each along with their photo.

When discussing the qualities he searches for in potential fellows, Dr. Dorsey said, "We see the fellows in their role as helpful, responsible, caring neighbors, which is almost what a citizen is."

The Greensboro site currently has eight fellows, while the Perry County site has six. The Pomona location has five fellows.

Health Partners Program

The health partners program launched in 2013 and provides care and social support to senior citizens in Greensboro. Fellows are partnered with seven to 10 seniors and both parties quickly reap the benefits of such transformational, genuine relationships.

Students work to build a mutually beneficial relationship with their seniors by providing them with stable companionship,



Top: The community center's renovated kitchen hosts cooking classes and community center programming for Greensboro citizens three times a week.

Middle left: The Greensboro Watchman provides the community with updates about the nonprofit, generating local support.

Middle right: Community members pose for a photo outside of the former Greensboro Hotel.

Bottom: Donnie Byrd, an avid community center participant, basks in the sunlight at the old Greensboro Hotel.



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Horseshoe Farm brings the G'boro Hotel building back to life ~ come and visit !

by Greensboro Watchman Publisher, Jerry Johnson

PROJECT HORSESHOE FARM

Dr. John A. Dorsey

For the first time I can remember, Dr. John Dorsey was absolutely unable to speak on April 22 when he had to address the Board of Directors, Officers and former members (and their families) and several friends and supporters at the...

Horseshoe Farm who were invited to the "Phase One" open house for "the Hotel" Horseshoe's new community center, the old Greensboro Hotel building. In fact, his emotional pause to gather his thoughts and regain the ability to speak spoke volumes regarding the deep emotion he felt at the opening of Phase One for Project Horseshoe Farm's renovation of the hotel building for a down long-term, but now in a state of...

Dr. Dorsey being Dr. Dorsey, he had organized once not being able to just hold an open house for the entire community, but construction delays and last-minute projects made that impossible. Besides, even though it was only April, there was no air conditioning installed yet. So, Horseshoe did what Horseshoe does best: they thought outside the box - well, actually outside the building - and had a literal block party from 1:00 to 8:00 p.m. on Market Street from Main Street down to Beacon Alley, with white lights hung across the street and tables decorated with fresh flowers for all I particularly loved seeing one strand of lights hung on the wing that was growing from the bricks of Harlan and through it building! And, perhaps to make the occasion more memorable, much quick teamwork was demonstrated when the sky later unzipped, rain poured down, and lightning added additional flares to the festivities, driving everyone inside the (already) finished building as people rushed about trying to collapse the tables, grab doors, and run into the building without knocking down anyone. Much of the history of the original Greensboro Hotel can be found in W.E.W. Verby's 1908 book "History of Greensboro from its earliest settlement." Verby was the publisher of The Greensboro Watchman from 1885 until his death in 1940. It was he who changed the name of the paper (which had been called the Southern Watchman from 1876), thus giving the paper the distinction and honor of being the first publication ever named for the town of Greensboro.

The Targen Vine estate donated the hotel property to Horseshoe Farm in 2014, an early greenhouse downs made it possible for Phase One to begin construction of the structure, up to the roof, and window work, with Phase Two completing the interior of the first three, which consists of a large room used for the program, complete with a state-of-the-art kitchen, large handicapped accessible hallways and even a stacked washer and dryer for those who need assistance in doing their laundry.

Toward the back of the building there is another multi-purpose room where health-screening clinics or a health classroom can be set up to facilitate fitness, diabetes management, support group meetings, and where "Nurse Janet" (Pamela) works with students and others to help them pursue their health goals. There are two private medical offices in the very back where Dr. Dorsey or other practitioners can see patients. Dr. Dorsey is doing outreach with the Hale County Hospital by seeing patients at this site that may be more centrally located and easier access for some folks.

Although the "Phase One" open house occurred back in April, Horseshoe didn't actually hold the first activation in the Hotel building until the week of July 23, a bit longer than expected for "Phase Two" completion, but pending the air conditioning being finished and working. The children's activities were the first "official" use of the new space on July 24.

Much thought, time, and enthusiasm has gone into keeping the historical elements of the building, with its beautiful stained metal ceilings, tile floors, and portions of the original...

place with cheering in each of the back rooms. The facade was carefully replicated, as well as have the look of the original hotel entrance. This article could not be reported honestly and wholly without acknowledging the tremendous efforts of John C. Williams, James Hamilton, Mark Harris, and Lee King, who worked tirelessly and often ridiculously late hours to bring this project to fruition.

So, what happens now in the "old" Horseshoe? Well, the building is the former Western Auto building on Main Street? Dorsey advises that this space will become administrative and office space for fellows and volunteer students.



day in and day out. Fellows accomplish this goal by taking their “health partners” to doctor’s appointments, spending quality time with them and encouraging healthy behaviors such as daily walks and involvement with Project Horseshoe Farm’s community center programs.

When discussing how the health partners program has changed her outlook on the nation’s health care system, Mackenzie Christensen, a senior fellow, said, “It has shown me that there are a lot of gaps in our health care system that we need to address and fix.”

Youth Program

The nonprofit’s youth program is run by fellows and interns under the leadership of Black Belt native and site director, LaShanda Richardson. This after-school program provides Greensboro children with a place to spend time growing both socially and academically. Project Horseshoe Farm picks participants up from their schools and brings them to the old Greensboro Hotel, where they spend an hour completing homework assignments and engaging in fun, educational activities. After that, they spend time playing interactive games, like pickleball or making arts and crafts.

Christensen said, “They’re really into cooking as well, even sometimes more than the adults.”

Community Center Program

Three days a week, Project Horseshoe Farm invites all community members to enjoy one another’s company over lunch and participate in group activities such as interactive games or meditation. The program averages 35 to 40 attendees, many of whom are eager to stay active and maintain positive social relationships.

“It’s a place here on main street in downtown Greensboro where everyone is welcome,” Assistant Director Sarah Hallmark said, grinning as she proudly surveyed the buzzing community center.

Participants may also earn points, known as horseshoes, by participating in activities like walking or cooking club. These points may be exchanged in their mock store for a variety of goods, such as personal hygiene items, socks or blankets once a month.

Additionally, to ensure that everyone who wants to attend can, the nonprofit offers free transportation for participants. Anyone needing a ride is picked up, either by the program’s van or a fellow or staff member’s personal vehicle.

As part of the program, Project Horseshoe Farm also has a workout facility available for all Greensboro citizens to use free of charge, as well as two pickleball courts and a ballroom space. For example, events like the nonprofit’s summer youth program and tai chi classes are held in the ballroom.





Auburn University's Rural Studio partnered with the nonprofit to build three pods, or living spaces, closer to the community center.



Each pod features a bed, kitchen, full bathroom and screened-in porch.



Housing program residents enjoy spending time together outside.



This quaint home houses three women through the nonprofit's South Street Enhanced Independent Living Program.

Housing Program

In Greensboro, the South Street Enhanced Independent Living Program provides affordable housing and mental health support to women living with psychosocial challenges. This program began on the outskirts of the city in an old farmhouse on Horseshoe Bend, giving the nonprofit its name. After some of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the program was moved closer to the community center.

A partnership was formed with the Auburn University Rural Studio, an off-campus design-build program, to help the nonprofit build three different pods, or living spaces, two blocks away from the community center on South Street. Each pod features a kitchen, bathroom and a screened-in porch.

A small home also sits in front of the pods with enough room for three women to live in. In these spaces, women can live independently while receiving support from Project Horseshoe Farm fellows and staff members. Fellows provide residents with social support by helping them with essential activities like grocery shopping. They also spend quality time with the women and ensure that they receive mental and emotional care.

"I kept up with my doctor's appointments with Dr. Dorsey, and I'm better, much, much better," said Shirley Crockett, a program resident of five years. Crockett came to Project Horseshoe Farm after experiencing a mental health relapse in 2018. In need of a place to live after leaving the hospital, her doctor recommended the program.

Today, with the help of Project Horseshoe Farm, Crockett has made major progress toward her goal of increased independence and stability. She plans to move from the small house to the pods soon and hopes to eventually live on her own.

"I'm like the house mother; if anybody needs help with something, I'm the one that's helping them," Crockett said.

The Perry County and Pomona sites offer nursing home living options instead of the independent living housing program.



Left to right: Fellow Walker Ferry, Senior Fellow Mackenzie Christensen, Site Director LaShanda Richardson, Founder and Executive Director Dr. John Dorsey, Assistant Director Sarah Hallmark

Community Impact

Today, the Greensboro and Perry County sites directly serve more than 250 individuals in search of social and mental health support. However, there are many more indirectly impacted by Project Horseshoe Farm and its tireless efforts to strengthen the communities it operates in.

The nonprofit has provided over 250,000 hours of transformative learning to more than 200 fellows from across the country since launching its fellowship program in 2009. Whether pursuing a medical or graduate social work degree, each fellow leaves Greensboro with a greater understanding of rural health care needs.

Donnie Byrd, a loyal community center program attendee, animatedly described what the program means to him and how it has impacted his life. He said, “This is one of the greatest programs I can be a part of. Dr. Dorsey is doing a great thing here!”

Community Support

The Greensboro community and its leaders have played an influential role in Project Horseshoe Farm’s success. Community members’ welcoming spirits and willingness to support the nonprofit have provided opportunities for the project to continue to expand and elevate its services.

“Mayor Washington has been a wonderful ally and just a person who’s really welcomed me into the community,” Dr. Dorsey said.

Project Horseshoe Farm also has several local partners

hospital and health system for Horseshoe Farm participants and for the whole community.

“If you’re looking for personal, good care, you can find it at the Hale County Hospital,” Hallmark said.

One former fellow, Dr. Meghan Bonds, has stuck around Greensboro and continues to make a positive impact on the quality of Black Belt health care. As a Hale County Hospital physician, she plays an influential role in the recruitment of exceptional doctors to the area.

The Future of Project Horseshoe Farm

The future of Project Horseshoe Farm is bright. The community health nonprofit continues to inspire communities looking to imitate the project while attracting potential medical students and top-notch physicians to rural Alabama.

However, Dr. Dorsey believes that the project has only just begun to make the impact it has the potential to, stating, “I see community-based work as long-term work, and I think we’re in the very early stages, even in Greensboro where we’ve been doing this work since 2007.”

Yet, it is clear that Project Horseshoe Farm is headed in the right direction. The program has already touched the lives of many Greensboro, Perry County and Pomona citizens, as well as over 200 fellows.

“I think that part of me was really always looking for a smaller and more personal place to live and a more personal place to practice,” Dr. Dorsey said.

Luckily, he has found exactly that. ■

which offer support and resources, including the local Emergency Management Agency (EMA) office and the local extension office.

“They come in and they may provide wellness classes or cooking classes to the after-school program and community center program,” Richardson said when discussing the services the local extension office provides.

Furthermore, the Hale County Hospital partners with the nonprofit and plays a major role in ensuring that Project Horseshoe Farm participants receive quality care. Dr. Dorsey emphasizes what a blessing it is to have such a strong