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Honoring a legacy of learning

By Roslyn Ryan/ Editor

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Virginia Lt. Gov. Winsome Sears, right, recorded the recollections of Second Union Rosenwald School alumna Gail Smith during a May 17 event held at the school, which has now been turned into a museum. Pictured in the photo is Julius Rosenwald, co-founder of the program that helped build over 5,000 similar schools for black students across the South during the time of school segregation.

Photo by Roslyn Ryan

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or Raymond Miller, it all started with a bus ride.

F Noting that he seemed to spend more time at recess than in the classroom at the school he was attending, Miller's mother waved down the school bus that was headed to Second Union School and asked the driver to take him there instead. In short order, Miller found himself standing in front of Ms. Fannie Beale, the teacher who would change his life.

On May 17, before an audience that included Virginia Lt. Gov. Winsome Sears, Miller and several other Second Union alumni shared their memories of Ms. Beale and the thriving two-room school, now a lovingly restored museum celebrating the legacy of the county's Rosenwald schools (see sidebar, right).

Sears served as the keynote speaker for the event, which was held in partnership with the Richmond Jewish Coalition, an organization that has been a strong supporter of the Second Union Rosenwald School Museum.

Listening to the former students relate their experiences at the school, it soon became clear that Second Union's focus on self-respect and rigorous academics helped underpin what would become a defining experience for many of them.

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Gail Smith, who attended Second Union from 1953 to 1959, described her time there as the best years of her life. With Beale at the helm, "everybody wanted to come to school," Smith said. They may not have had certain amenities most students today couldn't imagine going without—such as indoor plumbing or separate classrooms—

but the education they received at Second Union prepared her and her classmates for success outside the classroom, Smith remembered, and taught them the value of hard work and discipline.

Smith grew solemn last Tuesday as she noted that the respect she and her fellow students had for their teachers, and the value they placed on education, seems at times to be a thing of the past.

It was a theme echoed by Sears, who lamented to those in attendance that students in the United States have fallen woefully behind their counterparts in other nations when it comes to reading and math.

“We’ve come a long way,” said Sears, “but we’ve taken 10 steps back.” Sears said she hoped that the steadfast devotion to education and spirit of community that sustained the nation’s Rosenwald schools might serve as a model for how to repair the nation’s education system.

Both Miller and Smith went on to have successful careers, and, like so many of their former classmates, both say they don’t think they would have gone nearly as far if it had not been for the education they received at Second Union.

Calvin Hopkins, who now serves as the president of the SURSM Board of Directors, went into the Air Force as a young man and says he has no doubt that Ms. Beale’s continued emphasis on reading comprehension allowed him to excel on the entrance exam.

These days, Hopkins and his fellow board members continue their tireless efforts to preserve the legacy of the Rosenwald schools as a whole, but also their own cherished link to it.

During her visit, Sears toured the museum, learning about the cooperation, respect and discipline that helped make each day successful. She saw the chalkboards on the walls—some low and some high depending on whether they were for younger students or older ones—and the woodstove that was used to heat the building in the winter.

Addressing those in attendance after the tour, she praised both the SURSM leadership and the Richmond Jewish Coalition for their efforts.

“This is such a beautiful example of what can come out of this partnership,” Sears said. “It is just such an honor to be here.”