

# Nonprofit Purchases Historic Rosenwald School in Cape Charles for Restoration

By Stefanie Jackson

The Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative, a local nonprofit organization, purchased the historic African-American elementary school last month after nearly a decade of fundraising, and it is ready to restore the structure and give it back to the community.

The school located on Old Cape Charles Road is the namesake of Julius Rosenwald, an executive at Sears, Roebuck, and Company, who partnered with Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee University in 1912 “to improve the quality of public education for African Americans in the South during the period of legal segregation,” according to a press release.

The partnership lasted 20 years and resulted in nearly 5,000 schools built with more than \$4.3 million from the Rosenwald Fund and more than \$4.7 million raised by African-American communities.

The Cape Charles Rosenwald school was built in 1928 to serve African-American children during legal segregation.

It was also an African-American community center, where people gathered for events of family, food, and fun, like May Day, when children, adorned

in bright colors or their all-white Sunday best, danced around the maypole.

The school was open from 1929 until 1966. It was common for Rosenwald schools to stay open through the 1960s and 1970s, well past the Supreme Court’s ruling against racial segregation.

The school was sold in 1968 to the Robberecht family, and it was used as an eel-packing plant until 1977. It remained empty for years. Tevya Griffin, originally from Fairview, rode by one day with her grandmother, who pointed out the old four-room school and explained its history.

Griffin remembered, “It was a beautiful building ... I couldn’t understand why it was just sitting there.” The professional urban planner has a soft spot for historic building preservation.

Many Rosenwald schools were built with wooden clapboard siding and did not stand the test of time, but the Cape Charles school is a brick building in restorable condition.

Griffin eventually became the president of the Cape Charles Rosenwald School Restoration Initiative, formed in 2009 and incorporated in 2012. The nonprofit was awarded 501(c)(3) status in 2014.

The Northampton High School graduate is not old enough to have attended the Cape Charles Rosenwald school, but several others member in her organization are alumni: Ida Brown, James Davis Jr., Gerald Elliott, Valentina Evans, Shirley Galloway, and Mabel Mitchell.

The group bought the school and a 2.5-acre lot from the Robberechts for \$275,000.

The money was given primarily by private donors, but the nonprofit is seeking additional funding sources, including grants, for the building’s restoration.

The next steps are getting the Cape Charles Rosenwald school listed on the National Register of Historic Places and considering all possibilities for the adaptive re-use of the building.

It could become a workforce development center, a community kitchen, a meeting and performance venue, or



Photo courtesy of Tevya Griffin

The Cape Charles Rosenwald School was recently sold to a group that plans to renovate it.

a place to teach kids about STEM and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math).

However the school is re-used, it won’t be “just a museum,” but “a part of the community,” Griffin said.

The Cape Charles Rosenwald school originally “was set aside for one race, but now it will include everyone.”

For more information, email [capecharlesrosenwaldschool@gmail.com](mailto:capecharlesrosenwaldschool@gmail.com) or call 804-318-0607.

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