

Community Honors Ms. Coates

Residents vote to name new school after local African American teacher.

By Julia O'Donoghue, The Connection

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Phillip Calvin Bush has gray hair and walks with a cane now. It has been several years since he attended public schools in Fairfax County but he still has fond memories of one grade school teacher, Ms. Coates.

Without her, Bush would have been far worse off, he said.

Ms. Coates knew Bush's family had eight boys and they would not be able to send all of them to college. She harped on him to learn a trade when he got to high school so he would always be able to make a decent living.

Bush took Ms. Coates' advice and learned how to be a bricklayer while attending Luther Jackson, Fairfax's only high school for African Americans in the middle of the 20th century. He then worked as a bricklayer for the next several decades.

"I made twice as much money as other people were and I always had a job. Thanks Ms. Coates," said Bush.

BUSH and a handful of others advocated for naming Herndon's newest school Lutie Lewis Coates Elementary, after their beloved grade school teacher.

Coates, who is deceased, taught at the Floris Colored School and Luther Jackson High School in the 1940s and 1950s when Fairfax County's school system was still racially segregated.

The Floris Colored School – which was managed separately from Floris Elementary School – was located only a half a mile from the new elementary school site at 2480 River Birch Road.

The Fairfax County School Board will ultimately decide on a new school's name April 2 but residents living within the new school's boundary had the opportunity to vote on a recommendation for the board during a community meeting at McNair Elementary School March 5.

People who qualified to vote, only a handful of the 20 people attending the meeting, overwhelmingly supported calling the new school Lutie Lewis Coates, though other name suggestions included Albert Einstein, Horace Mann, Coppermine and Dulles.

If the school board chooses to name the school after Coates, it will be only the second school in the county named after an African American woman and the first since the school system was integrated.

"She promoted, pushed and lived education ... Boy, what joy this would have brought her," said Sheila Coates, the teacher's daughter-in-law, at the meeting.

RICCI GIBBS said she was inspired to join the civil rights movement by Coates, who talked about racial and gender equality every morning when teaching Gibbs' eighth grade homeroom class.

"She was a fixture in this neighborhood. She was very stern. We listened to her and we respected her ... I would love to see her name over that door," said Joseph Carpenter, who had Coates as a teacher in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Yvonne Johnson, a historian with Frying Pan Park, said selecting a local person to honor instead of a national figure like Einstein could also make the school's name more meaningful.

"I really believe it is the everyday people and everyday heroes that inspire us ... [The teachers at Floris Colored School] they had a lot of adversity. They were doing a lot more with a lot less," said Johnson.