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A Cause for Dedication

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Their Building Long Gone, Students of a Segregated School in Fairfax Want a New Facility to Be Named for Revered Teacher, 'a Mother to All of Us'

By Michael Alison Chandler
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Eight years ago, a Fairfax County teacher fought to save a dilapidated wooden building on Squirrel Hill Road near Herndon that once served as a school for black children in a community of mostly farmers and sharecroppers.

Mary Weadon's petition to save the Floris Colored School did not get very far. The building has been destroyed and the lot paved over for parking. But she sees another chance to resurrect its memory.

A half-mile away, amid acres of condominiums, an elementary school is under construction. Weadon said she hopes that when it opens in September, it will bear the name of Lutie Lewis Coates, a cherished teacher who worked at the segregated school.

The county School Board will vote Thursday on whether to approve the name. This month, a group of community members cast its vote for the educator during a meeting in the McNair Elementary cafeteria attended by some of her relatives and former students.

"She was a fixture in this neighborhood -- a teacher and a mother to all of us," said Joseph Carpenter, 73, a graduate of the Floris Colored School who lives in Arlington County. "I would love to see her name go up there above that door."

Philip Bush, 76, of Fauquier County recalled that Coates once gave him some instrumental advice.

"My family had eight boys alone, not including the girls. She knew we couldn't afford college for everybody. She encouraged me to go to a trade school. I did. I became a bricklayer. . . . Always had a job. I worked all over the area."

The new 32-classroom school on River Birch Road will have high-tech white boards and projectors. It's a far cry from the two-room building that was warmed by a potbellied stove and had no indoor plumbing.

The Floris Colored School opened in the late 1800s at Centreville and Frying Pan roads and later moved to a site off Coppermine Road.

Carpenter said he remembered how Coates taught lessons to one grade level at a time, while the other children worked at their desks. Carpenter and Bush went to high school at Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth because there were no high schools for black children in Fairfax at that time.

Coates's career as a teacher and principal spanned three decades and several schools, including Luther Jackson High School, which opened in 1954.

Coates came from a prominent African American family in Manassas that was devoted to education, said her niece Diane M. Lewis, who lives in Reston.

Coates's father, Roscoe Conklin Lewis, taught blacksmithing at the Manassas Industrial school. Many of her eight siblings went to college and had careers in medicine, the Foreign Service and the federal government. One brother, Roscoe Jr., became a high school principal in the District, her niece said.

Lutie Coates attended Virginia State College and graduate school at New York University.

"She encouraged all of us in education," said her daughter-in-law Sheila Coates, who attended George Mason University and founded a women's rights organization, Black Women United for Action. She attributes her drive and ambition to her mother-in-law.

Lutie Coates's husband, Leslie Coates, came from a family that owned more than 100 acres near what is now Dulles International Airport. The family's beef cattle farm was one of the most successful black-owned businesses in Northern Virginia at the time, news reports and family members said.

When Lutie Coates died in 1965, she left behind her husband and two sons. Her son Leo lives in Herndon, a few miles from the new school that might bear her name.

"She taught so many, gave so much to the county," Sheila Coates said. "Boy, what a joy that would have brought her."

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