

Closing Doors, Opening Doors: Fifty Years After the School-Closing in Prince Edward County, Virginia

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The bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln has given our country an opportunity to remember the brutal conflict that almost destroyed the Republic. In its own way, the event we recall today—the closing of the public schools of Prince Edward County in 1959—was a last battle of the Civil War. History marked this County. On April 7, 1865, Robert E. Lee, knowing that defeat was imminent, rested here briefly before his final retreat. On April 8, the next day, Ulysses Grant, in pursuit, was in Prince Edward County. He dispatched a note to his adversary. They agreed to meet at the Appomattox Court House the next day. And so on April 9, 1865, the Civil War was ended by its most illustrious commanders. Ulysses Grant became President of the United States. Robert E. Lee devoted the last five years of his life to efforts to “lead the young men in peace” and he gave this advice to southern parents: “Forget local animosities. Teach your sons to be Americans.” It took a very long time for that message to reach the White establishment of Virginia and in particular Prince Edward County. The racial, political, economic, cultural struggle that defined the Civil War found its last echoes in the voices of those who invented “massive resistance” to the Supreme Court’s decisions on desegregation and who fought bitterly over the role and future of the public schools of this County.

In 1959 Prince Edward County had almost 16,000 residents. More than half of the farm owners were White, but the majority of the 6,000 tenant and farm workers were African-American. Twelve hundred farms averaging about 120 acres in size and carved out of the County’s heavily wooded hills had tobacco as its major crop. Prince Edward was regarded as part of the “Black Belt,” the name given those areas of the South where the African-American population approached or exceeded 50 percent. Many of its families dated to pre-Revolutionary times.

On April 23, 1951, the students at the Robert R. Moton High School—all African-American—went on strike to protest the overcrowded, leaky, badly heated buildings that had been erected as temporary facilities but then had acquired a distressing permanence. The NAACP, in a search led by its counsel, Thurgood Marshall, was looking for situations which could be developed into Civil Rights cases to challenge the constitutionality of segregation and overturn the doctrine of Separate but Equal established by the Supreme Court in Plessey v. Ferguson decided in 1896. Barbara Johns, the 16 year old student who led the protest at the Robert Moton School, was the niece of Vernon Johns, an early and inspirational advocate of desegregation. The picketing students were insisting on better facilities—and to that, the facts were clear and the Prince Edward County School Board was quick to reply. It promised a new high school and within two years there was such a school which under the doctrine of Separate but Equal would have been acceptable, but the

argument had already advanced beyond that point. The NAACP lawyers told the students that they would file suit if the students would agree to press for ending segregation, if the students would end their strike, and if their parents would join the litigation. The African-American community met to discuss the situation in the First Baptist Church of Farmville of which the Reverend Francis Griffin was the Pastor. The lawsuit was approved. It was filed on May 23, 1951. It was one of the five cases that became Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas. The Supreme Court of the United States decided the Brown case on May 17, 1954. It ruled unanimously that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Freedom in America had a new definition, but enforcement of the Court's decision was a different matter. Desegregation was supposed to be accomplished with "all deliberate speed" but in Virginia the ruling establishment responded with "massive resistance" and Prince Edward County made clear that their schools would never be desegregated even if they had to be padlocked to prevent it.

It became a legal war of attrition. The best lawyers of Virginia and of the NAACP fought tenaciously in the federal and state courts. In 1956, the Board of Supervisors enacted a resolution that prohibited any tax levies that could be used to support public schools at which both "white" and "colored" were taught. In 1959, disgusted by the delays and the legal labyrinth that had been created, the United States Court of Appeals directed the immediate desegregation of the Prince Edward public schools.

And that is where our story begins. True to its word, the Board of Supervisors refused to appropriate money for its public schools, resulting in their closing [for four years]. The 1,500 white children attended hastily organized private schools which were privately funded and also subsidized by state tuition grants. The 1,800 African-American children in the County were left without formal instruction. Back and forth. Back and forth. Legal arguments, endless motions, federal and state courts intervening, rising anger, demonstrations—then the Virginia Supreme Court upheld the Prince Edward supervisors, essentially ruling that there was no constitutional obligation to have public schools but if the local authorities did have public schools they had to be desegregated. The federal district court rejected this decision but refused to order the opening of the schools until the United States Supreme Court ruled.

During the course of these events, John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States. He, and his brother, the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, were personally determined to resolve the crisis, hopefully in the courts. Despite the prodding and the pressure of the Justice Department, the legal process malingered. President Kennedy made reference to the Prince Edward situation in his 1962 State of the Union address. After the Virginia Supreme Court decision, he again publicly expressed his dismay. In a 1962 press conference President Kennedy said there were only four places in the world where children are denied the right to attend school. He named them: North Korea, North Vietnam, Cambodia and Prince Edward County, Virginia. Privately he told the Attorney General that the situation was unacceptable, that the children had been denied education for three years already, and that a way had to be found to have the children in school by September. It was 1963. In May, Robert Kennedy called me to his office,

reviewed the legal situation, expressed the President's profound concern, and instructed me to go to southern Virginia and Prince Edward County to see what could be done.

So began countless trips to Richmond and rural Virginia; endless meetings beginning with Francis Keppel, the federal Commissioner of Education and his colleagues, and interviews and discussions with the leaders of Prince Edward County, and a review of the mass of the material that had been written about the closing of the schools and the process of desegregating educational facilities. Burke Marshall, the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights—and one of the pre-eminent public servants of his time—told me that there was no possibility that the case would reach the Supreme Court and be decided before its Spring term in 1964. If the children were to have school facilities, it would have to be accomplished by an unprecedented effort of public and private forces.

I met at length with the Reverend Francis Griffin, the pastor of the First Baptist Church of Farmville. He was also the state chairman of the NAACP. His children were both litigants and students, deeply affected by the crisis. Reverend Griffin was a wonderful preacher, a modest man of tenacious determination, a leader who worked tirelessly and never spared himself, a minister of God's word who had been bullied, harassed, vilified, insulted but who never lost his dignity, his patience, and his courage. As I developed the idea with him of a privately funded Free School Association with excellent teachers offering an outstanding educational opportunity to all of the children of the County, he saw as I did the incredible complexities in bringing it about. I asked him: "Reverend Griffin, would you support the effort if only African-American children responded and the white families boycotted the schools?" Together we saw the Free School possibility as a bridge to the time we were certain would come when the Supreme Court would order restoration of public education—and Reverend Griffin's affirmation of the effort, indispensable to its possibility, depended on his confidence that his community would support it. The African-American community knew that President Kennedy and the Department of Justice would be behind the Free School program and that quality education could help make up what their children had lost and in no way diminish the federal government's commitment to abolish Apartheid in America. But the cooperation of the authorities of Prince Edward County was also necessary because we had to lease the school buildings from them. The Free School Association would have to be privately financed, racially integrated, and of a stature to command the approval of the Virginia establishment.

I visited at length with Barrye Wall, the publisher of *The Farmville Herald*. He was the leader of the "close the schools" movement. His attitudes reflected classic white supremacist values, veiled in the parlance of nullification, secession, and states' rights. He was convinced, as he said, "that in the South neither the White race nor the Negro race would be happy in an integrated society." Barrye Wall was 5'2", white haired, a rather corpulent man in his mid-sixties, always with a Phi Beta Kappa Key across his necktie, scrupulously polite, easily available for talk and discussion—and convinced as he warned the community in multiple editorials—that "outside sources are using your children as pawns in a national if not international conspiracy, and we citizens of Prince Edward are not going to pay for integrated schools." As he often said to me: "and that's that." Every editorial ended with the battle cry: "Stand steady, Prince Edward."

There was no possibility in the white community of disagreeing with Mr. Wall without painful consequences but in the midst of the bullying and harassment there were heroes determined to save the soul of Virginia, as they put it, and keep the Commonwealth in the Union. Such a man was Gordon Moss, the Dean of Longwood Teachers College for Women in Farmville. A kind, soft-spoken gentleman of impeccable Confederate ancestry, Mr. Moss favored integrated public schools and said so in interviews with national media. He was told his academic position was in jeopardy. He was asked to leave his church, old friends avoided being seen with him. Dean Moss was convinced that major opposition to public education was based not only on racial attitudes but also on economics. Prince Edward was a poor county. Less than ten percent of its tax revenues came from the African-American community and more than half of the students were the children of that community. In the private conversations of the powerful, these facts were frequently noted. Professor Moss believed that integration was the excuse that the leaders of the segregationist movement had been seeking for a long time, an opportunity to get rid of the public schools. He publicly stated that the forces behind closing the schools believed that educating the white children in private schools would be much less expensive and would keep the supply of cheap, unskilled Negro labor available in the county. There would be no tobacco without this cheap labor and tobacco was the only significant money crop in the county. He saw the “white establishment” as feeling threatened by the possibilities of a liberal education for the Negroes. They recognized that they could hardly maintain the status quo of privilege and prerogative if a fully adequate education was given to the African-American community.

After reporting my detailed proposal for the Free School Association to the Attorney General, I convened the interested parties on July 16, 1963, in the office of Commissioner Keppel, a fearless, articulate, non-bureaucratic leader who had been the Dean of the Harvard School of Education before joining the Kennedy Administration. The recommended proposal was favorably received but extreme doubt was expressed that it could be carried out—there were only two months to organize a school system, raise the necessary funds, hire an integrated faculty and not least of all encourage the children to come back to school. Robert Kennedy had his doubts too but he authorized me to go ahead—if the goal was right, he was not intimidated by obstacles. “All I want you to do,” he said, “is to keep me posted. Talk to me every day—a minute will be enough—then I will know where you are and what you are up to.” His suggestions and interventions along the way were indispensable to our success. He was a brilliant administrator, unleashing the imagination and energy of those he trusted while having a clear sense of what was happening.

I briefed the Governor of Virginia, Albertis Harrison, in his Richmond office about our plan. The first and crucial step was to establish an interracial Board of Trustees to be appointed by the Governor. Albertis Harrison was equal to the challenge. He asked Colgate Darden, a former Governor of Virginia and President Emeritus of the University of Virginia, to be its chairman. Colgate Darden was of the quality of our Founding Fathers. He was saddened to see his beloved state waste its resources and its children’s lives in racial confrontation, but he had also been a witness against desegregation in the 1951 trial of the Prince Edward lawsuit. He came to Washington and met with Robert Kennedy, and

talked to the President. I spent hours with Colgate Darden reviewing the complexities of what had to be done. He agreed to serve. On August 14, 1963, Governor Harrison held a press conference with Colgate Darden, Reverend Griffin and myself at his side. He announced the formation of the Prince Edward County Free School Association with Colgate Darden as its Chairman. Also appointed were the Vice Chairman, Dr. Thomas Henderson, President of the Virginia Union University, Dr. F.D.G. Ripple, the retiring Dean at the University of Virginia Law School as Treasurer. The other members were Dr. Fred B. Cole, President of Washington Lee University; Dr. Robert P. Daniel, President of Virginia State College; and Dr. Earl H. McClenney, President of St. Paul's College at Lawrenceville. The racial balance among the Board members, their eminence and their dedication to education validated our effort. *The New York Times* ran the photograph of the press conference as a front-page story. Colgate Darden later said: "I have been a Congressman, a Governor, a University President but this—Chairman of the Free School Board of Trustees—is the most important service I will have rendered my native state of Virginia."

The date of the opening of the Free Schools in Prince Edward County was set for September 16. We had a month to organize a school system for 1,900 children. It was a hot and violent summer, the march on Washington was scheduled to be held on August 28. The stakes were high. Failure was not an option. The first task was to find an educator who could serve as superintendent of the school system.

Commission Keppel suggested talking to Neil Sullivan who had written extensively on non-graded education and who was serving as Superintendent of Schools in an affluent school district in New York. I called Dr. Sullivan on August 16. He knew about the crisis—and wrote later that he felt as though a lightning bolt had hit him with my call. Public education and racial issues were his two driving interests. Neil Sullivan became a close friend and a respected colleague. I told him that the plan for the Free School Association had been approved by both the President and the Attorney General, that Colgate Darden had accepted its leadership, supported by five outstanding citizens of the Commonwealth. After meeting with the Attorney General and with Governor Darden, Dr. Sullivan agreed to go to Farmville and tell us within 48 hours if he would take the position.

Colgate Darden had conditioned his acceptance of the position of Chairman on agreement that picketing by the children would be prohibited. Reverend Griffin said he could not ask the children for that commitment, that it was a matter of freedom of speech but he believed that there was no desire to be disruptive and that if the schools could be opened and its possibilities properly described the children would not undertake demonstrations. Governor Darden withdrew his demand.

Hundreds of students and parents joined by 20 white citizens who supported their cause met on August 21 at the First Baptist Church and heard Reverend Griffin and myself present the case for the Free Schools. There were questions, there were concerns, there were prayers, there was singing, but by the end of the evening there was a strong affirmation of what we were trying to do. Neil Sullivan spent intensive time meeting with families and children and former teachers and others like Barrye Wall. On August 27, at a

meeting of the Trustees in Lawrenceville, Virginia, the position was offered and Neil Sullivan agreed to take it. The next day was the historic march on Washington and Martin Luther King Jr.'s unforgettable "I Have A Dream" speech. Dr. King had indicated support for our efforts. The leaders of the NAACP were with us every step of the way.

There was a wonderful spirit that touched every part of our effort. There was a feeling that we had broken through some terrible barriers, that there was a possibility of creating a new and different America. On September 3, the County Board of Supervisors authorized the contract to lease the schools to the Free School Association after meeting with me and Governor Darden. The four school buildings including the Robert Moton High School had been padlocked for more than three years. There were no books, no teaching materials, the school buildings had to be repaired and cleaned. The library was practically bare, the cafeteria had to be rebuilt. In fact, the buildings were in deplorable condition. Dirt, dust and rubbish were everywhere. Floor boards were rotting, plaster had fallen, water had penetrated the walls. The toilet areas were cluttered with debris and the stench was sickening. In two weeks all of this had to be changed. Mr. J.D. Dishman was the gentleman who had the responsibility for building maintenance for the Board of Education. He told Dr. Sullivan that he would undertake the work but would take orders only from him and not from any Negro. But, in fact, he worked around the clock, cleaned the schools on schedule, made all the necessary repairs and in time came to take orders from Negroes.

We had to hire 100 teachers. The African-American teachers who had been part of the faculty of the schools, for the most part had left the county when the schools were closed in 1959. The word went out from Commissioner Keppel's office and from the National Education Association that 100 teachers were urgently needed, teachers of high quality, with experience in non-graded teaching, men and women who would have the flexibility to deal with certain and uncertain challenges that required courage and optimism to withstand. One of the first faculty hired by Dr. Sullivan was Miss Willie Mae Watson, a former Norfolk principal who had returned from two years in Nigeria with the Peace Corps, as our Supervisor of Elementary Education. Miss Watson was a born leader with boundless energy, with incredible spirit and courage. She began contacting former Peace Corps associates. I talked to the leaders of the Peace Corps, leaders of the teachers' unions. The media wrote stories telling of our need. Invitations to qualified teachers to apply for positions went out to every school superintendent of cities with more than 100,000 population and to every college and university of any size which trained teachers. We placed ads in the leading newspapers.

Finding secretarial help was as difficult if not more difficult than finding teachers. Half of the teachers hired were from Virginia, an objective Colgate Darden and the Trustees were anxious to bring about. More than 30 percent of the faculty was white—and five of those white teachers were Virginians. Miss Etta Rose Bailey of Richmond, a white elementary school principal who had retired the previous June and who was probably the state's outstanding principal but who had never taught Negro children, readily agreed to become principal of one of the elementary schools. She said: "You are giving me an opportunity that has been denied me during all of my 45 years in Virginia schools. I have

always wanted to work with Negro children.” Faculty members began arriving from around the country. The Pledge of Allegiance was spoken at the end of their first meeting. As the final phrase was concluded, Etta Rose Bailey spoke: “I have repeated that oath all of my life,” she said, “and only now at 70 do I really understand what it means.”

“... One nation under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for all.”

Everyone participated in the clean-up to get the schools ready. Virginia State College arranged to send 20 student teachers so that there would be enough personnel while out-of-state teachers were making arrangements to arrive. Housing was a major problem. Dr. Rudolph Doswell was already working for the Trustees at the Branch Elementary School. He was absolutely invaluable. He contacted African-American families regarding housing. Suddenly the rent on single rooms doubled. Reverend Griffin was a one-man price control system. The new teachers were already absorbing significant financial sacrifices. The salaries of the Free School Association were without exception lower than what they had been receiving in their present positions. The affluent school districts who encouraged individual teachers to take sabbaticals and join with us were also helpful in subsidizing the salaries of those who came, including the East Williston School Board for Dr. Sullivan.

In the midst of threatening mail and phone calls, the families of the county had to be approached to bring about the registration of their children. They enrolled in large numbers. Vaccinations and inoculations began. Long lines formed early every day with parents and their children who were extremely well-mannered. They stood in line for hours without complaint. But they were silent. They did not laugh or play or talk, they just stood in line. For many of them, they would be entering school for the first time. For most of them, they had not been in touch with educational programs for three years. Many of them lived in isolated rural areas with very little social contact. The stories are endless of the goodwill, of the spirit, of the energy, of the hope, of the courage of all those who participated in opening the schools.

As of August 15, no funds had been raised. The anticipated budget would approach \$2 million—in 1963, a very significant sum. The first contribution, privately and with no publicity, came from President Kennedy himself—\$10,000. I then began an endless series of conversations with the leaders of the major foundations, finally putting together a consortium, led by the Ford Foundation and the Marshall Field Foundation, which assured us of at least \$500,000. Teacher groups around the country made it clear that they wanted to participate. The National Education Association (NEA) was heroic in enabling individual teachers and educational groups to become sponsors of our effort. The children of Cleveland gave \$30,000. The teachers of Washington State gave \$20,000. Literally hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised from teacher associations, parent-teacher groups, and school children around America. I approached corporate leaders. For some it was necessary to arrange telephone conversations with Robert Kennedy so they could be assured of the importance of the Prince Edward County project as far as the Administration was concerned. The financing of the Prince Edward County Free School Association—all from private sources—was assured. The money was carefully spent, and closely audited.

Michigan State University, under Dr. Robert Green, organized a team to study the implications of the failure to provide schooling to the children of Prince Edward County. The University psychologist who had done the testing found that the mean IQ of the test group of the Prince Edward County students interviewed was only 69—in a representative group of normal children that number would have approximated 100. It was clear that the longer children were out of school, the more significant was the drop in their IQ. Many children did not know how old they were. The extent of the psychological intellectual damage was startling. The majority of the children under 12 had essentially lost their ability to communicate as well as their reading skills. They came from illiterate or semi-literate homes. Very few homes had a daily newspaper or access to magazines or books. The only library in the community was for “whites only.” The remedial effort of the Free Schools changed all of that and restored the IQ levels to normal. Three of the 1,570 students had IQs of over 150. One was an eight year old boy named Beauregard Lee who could trace his ancestry five generations in Prince Edward County. His father was a mechanic, his mother a nurse. At eight years of age he loved Mark Twain, could discuss John Glenn’s orbiting the earth with intensity, he knew about Arthur Miller and wanted to know more about James Baldwin.

The Free Schools were scheduled to open on September 16, 1963. The media from all over the country came to Farmville. As the nation looked to Prince Edward County for hope with the opening of the schools, on Sunday, September 15, the day before our opening, a bombing in Birmingham killed four little girls as they attended church. The gloom and despair of the Birmingham murders was felt by all of us. It was a reminder of the hatred and criminality that had attended the lynch mob enforcement of segregation since the Civil War. The story of the Prince Edward County Free Schools was the other side of the coin. The decency of America was its message. A willingness to reach out to a fractured community distorted by attitudes of racial supremacy was the definition of our effort. In less than a month we had enlisted more than 100 faculty members from all over America, black and white, qualified beyond any previous measure to offer the remedial education that was critical to our success. And on opening day we had 15 white children join the 1,550 black children—there was Mrs. William Tew, the wife of a white farmer who owned a small amount of tobacco acreage south of Farmville who came with her eight year old daughter. She hadn’t sent her daughter to the white academy because they “didn’t like that kind of private school.” There was Dickie Moss, the son of Dean Moss, who left completely to his own decision-making process decided that he wanted to carry on the fight of his father. He was a senior in the high school class. They came—the children came neatly dressed, clean, and touched by fear of what was going to happen. They were met by an educational opportunity that they had never had before. The faculty had nightly orientation sessions to teach colleagues team teaching and how to operate a non-graded school system. Activities for the students were kept open until 5:30 every afternoon and on Saturdays too. The library and science labs, the art and the music rooms all stayed open. Tutorial classes in reading and mathematics were held after school hours. Vocational training and building trades, auto mechanics, agriculture, homemaking, office procedures, beauty culture were offered in the rehabilitated classrooms. Students elected their own student council and drafted their own rules for governing activities. The older students

were treated as adults and given an opportunity to earn money by being cafeteria workers, library assistants, playground supervisors. They became first-class citizens overnight.

The children who initially were quiet, taciturn, laconic, removed, burst into new demonstrations of energy, vitality and imagination. The bonding of the teachers and students created a memorable community. There were crises, unexpected crises. The autumn of 1963 produced a severe drought in Virginia and especially in Prince Edward County. Suddenly we were told that the water supply was exhausted. The children were sent home. But a group of students came to see Neil Sullivan. They pleaded with him not to close the schools again. How are we going to get along without water? he asked. How would we handle the toilet problems? Simple, one of the boys replied. We will divide the woods behind the school—the girls can have one side, we will use the other. Fortunately, it turned out that only a new pump was needed and that we could take care of immediately, but what it showed was that everyone was prepared to deal with whatever crisis developed.

The progress in communication and reading was breathtaking, but with the cold weather of early winter, the absences from school became significant because the children did not have proper clothes. Overnight, in response to the appeals we made through the media, tons of warm clothing, heavy shoes and raincoats were delivered to Prince Edward County. The whole experience of the Free Schools was blanketed with the landscape of poverty. Children fell asleep at their desks because they did not have breakfast—malnutrition was evident. Our schools provided a free lunch program that contributed significantly to the well-being of the students and the school environment. The schools brought medical care, the polio vaccine, optometric examinations for glasses and vision defects, audio instructors to test hearing and a full-time dentist who gave many of the children their first toothbrushes and dental care.

In the background was harassment, the midnight phone calls, the driving through Neil Sullivan's property dumping garbage, trees decorated with floral arrangements from local cemeteries, bomb threats and murder threats to the Trustees. Nevertheless, the Free School faculty not only worked together but formed close bonds of friendship and association. Morale was very high. The faculty formed a successful basketball team. A choir of mixed voices gave concerts. Art classes and literary groups met. Bridge and chess tournaments were plentiful and on Tuesday nights there were free movies for students, parents and teachers. I contacted the Motion Picture Association in Washington. They provided first-run feature length films free of charge. In response to our request, publishers sent thousands of books. Our high school students took out countless books monthly to read at home. With so many books in hand we were able to give books to many families to start their home libraries. Leonard Bernstein helped us find musical instruments for the children and before graduation there was a band that gave full-dress concerts, playing not less than a dozen numbers and proudly wearing the handsome blue and gold uniforms presented to them by a Long Island school district. There was special teaching for handicapped children because another Peace Corps volunteer, Madge Shipp of Detroit, whose grandparents had fought their way out of slavery, was a specialist in that field.

Disciplinary problems were almost non-existent. Absenteeism was a problem. Virginia had repealed its compulsory attendance law in order to protect the Prince Edward Board of Supervisors from legal liability. If a child was needed on the farm that was a priority for many poor families. Reverend Griffin and his many friends and colleagues stayed in close touch with families throughout the county and overcame the problems that had caused the absenteeism.

We bought an old Army surplus bus and christened it PT 109. Students took trips to Appomattox, to Charlottesville, to Monticello, to the University of Virginia. Some 28 students were brought to New York in a bus chartered by City College students. They were personally greeted by Mayor Robert Wagner. They toured the United Nations and met with Dr. Ralph Bunche, and they had lunch at the home of Jackie Robinson.

The news of November 22, 1963, the death of President Kennedy, had a special and tragic impact on everyone involved with the Free School Association. John F. Kennedy was their sponsor, their friend. He had carried the torch for these Free Schools. Students signed a special book which was sent to Mrs. Kennedy saying: "Your sorrow is very much our own." The President's death had another result. The harassment stopped. There seemed to be a new acceptance by the general community. The integrated faculty of the Free Schools was invited to use Longwood College's library, the first time ever that a white library in Farmville had been opened to African-Americans. Thirty students from Hampden-Sydney College volunteered for afterschool tutoring coordinated by a wonderful man, the College chaplain, Arthur Field, a young Presbyterian minister who had recently arrived. Several wives of Hampden-Sydney faculty members joined our staff, including the wife of the football coach who became a guidance counselor. Free School representatives were welcomed at Hampden-Sydney assembly programs and representatives of the College accepted our invitations to special events such as the recital given one afternoon by the touring Dartmouth College Glee Club at the Free Schools. As the representative of the Attorney General and the federal government, I was invited to speak to the student body of Hampden-Sydney College. I welcomed the invitation. On that day almost 50 years ago, I said: "Public education is the means by which our society guarantees all of our children that they shall have the opportunity to learn, grow and develop. We must not allow the destruction of the fundamental institution of public education which safeguards against innocent children being the prisoners of poverty and social status." I ended by quoting from the essay on liberty by Learned Hand, one of America's great Justices—and closed by saying that the spirit of liberty in some form is part of the aspirations of us all. It takes conscience and courage to permit that spirit to be part of the American dream. The spirit of liberty was at the core of what we were doing in the Free Schools of Prince Edward County.

Robert Kennedy, still Attorney General, and Ethel Kennedy came to Prince Edward County in the spring of 1964. Colgate Darden met them at the airport and guided them through the schools. There were not many dry eyes among the huge crowds on that day. We lunched with the children in the cafeteria, and the Attorney General and Mrs. Kennedy met with the families and parents of the children. The County officials came forward to greet their distinguished visitors.

The Supreme Court decision was imminent. The case had been argued on March 30. Students and faculty of the Prince Edward County Free Schools had been in the courtroom and heard the arguments before the distinguished Justices.

On May 25, 1964, writing for a unanimous Court, Justice Hugo Black held that the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors had acted unconstitutionally in closing the public schools and that the African-American school children had been denied equal protection of the laws. Public education and the governmental responsibility for it had been affirmed and the insidious system of tuition grants to support segregated private education was stricken down.

Our hope was that the Free Schools would be a bridge to a reconstructed community and that, most of all, these hundreds of innocent children would not forfeit the opportunities of their lives because they had been denied their constitutional right to go to school. We worked with the county authorities to assist in the preparation for school reopening in September 1964. We transferred thousands of books, excellent audio-visual equipment, clean and modern facilities, and made some wonderful teachers available for hiring.

There is one other event I would mention—the commencement exercises which took place on June 15 in the auditorium of Moton High School. There were 23 members of the graduating class. The schools had been certified so college and other educational opportunities were open to them. Grace Poindexter and John Branch, the valedictorians, spoke on the theme of “Education Lights the Torch for Freedom.” The Reverend Francis Griffin gave the invocation and the benediction. Colgate Darden introduced me as the commencement speaker. It was an occasion to celebrate the heroes of a long journey—the children of Prince Edward County, African-American and White, who made our aspiration a reality and the parents of those children who despite years of demeaning sacrifice gave their integrity and courage as an ultimate gift to their children. We all sang Climb Every Mountain—and I think all of us felt that we had climbed every mountain and we were at the peak.

In the few remaining years of his life, Attorney General and later Senator Robert Kennedy and I talked often about Prince Edward County. One of its legacies is an idea that was born of our witness to the extraordinary idealism of America’s teachers who responded to the call almost overnight to build the Free Schools of Prince Edward County. I wrote a memorandum suggesting a National Teacher Corps so that those wonderful teachers around the country who truly wanted to be involved in the struggle for civil rights and against poverty could enlist for a year or two, maintaining their base in their home communities, while traveling to those portions of the country where the brilliance of their commitment could bring hope to American children who might otherwise never have a chance. It became law and survives to this day, not as we had originally proposed it but nevertheless effective.

Some of the students of the Free Schools may be here tonight. I know that Mark Warner when he was Governor of Virginia passed legislation that honored your sacrifice

and your achievements and made scholarship assistance available even at this late date. As we finish our evening together, the 44th President of the United States will be going before the Congress to give his first State of the Union Address. How extraordinary. How appropriate that a nation in crisis looks to its first African-American President who was not even born at the time that the controversy we discussed here tonight began. How we look to him for confidence and leadership, relying on his dignity, his intelligence, his integrity and his commitment to the Constitution of the United States. In some way, the struggle of Prince Edward County planted seeds that have allowed this flowering of our nation to come to pass.*

* *Editor's Note:* This article is based on the keynote address presented by Ambassador vanden Heuvel on February 24, 2009, to a symposium at Hampden-Sydney College in Prince Edward County, Virginia.