REBUILDING A LEGACY AT FAIRMONT HEIGHTS

By Leon WynterFebruary 19, 1981

Fairmont Heights was one of the “big four” high schools in Prince George’s County -- along with Bladensburg, Suitland and Northwestern -- when it opened in 1950. It was designed and equipped to educate more than 1,000 students.

But from the day that principal James Gholson welcomed the school’s first students that fall, Fairmont Heights High School was special to its students, faculty and the solidly black community that surrounded it.

As a black school in Prince George’s de jure and then de facto segregated system, Fairmont Heights thrived in separate but equal isolation for 19 years, developing strong roots in the neighborhoods of Fairmont Heights, Capitol Heights and Beaver Heights.

In 1969, the federal government pressed county authorities to integrate the remaining all-black schools. When the school board redrew attendance boundaries so the student populaton would become half white and half black, white parents moved away, arranged transfers for their children or put them in private schools in such numbers that enrollment declined to 713 students, compared with the pre-integration enrollment of 1,300 students.

As the board pursued its controversial efforts to integrate the system, it tried twice -- in 1972 and 1974 -- to close Fairmont Heights and bus its students to other schools. But the school and the community protested and succeeded in keeping the school open.

One of the plans to close the school was coauthored by board member A. James Golato and former member Rodney Johnson, and would have turned Fairmont Heights into a special performing arts center. Hundreds of community residents turned out to protest.

“A lot of people felt that (the plan for a performing arts school) would just shut out the people in the community,” said Deborah Franklin, a Fairmont teacher and 1970 graduate of the school. “Every time (the school board tries to close the school), people would come out in big numbers and they (the school) would back down. There’s a lot of emotion tied up in the school. People felt that it was something that needed to be maintained.”

Community and school leaders also led a six-year, often uphill, struggle to fund extensive renovations for the school, located on Reed and Nye streets. After a fire caused $500,000 damage last year, county and state officials finally approved major remodeling.

Last week the students and faculty of Fairmont Heights moved -- lock, stock and track trophies -- a few miles east into the vacant Kent Junior High so the $8.2 million renovation finally could begin.

The plans call for an overhaul of the aging electrical and plumbing systems, replacement of what Franklin called “cracked-up, dirty, filthy ceilings” and replacement of the library, which was destroyed in last year’s fire.

Clarence McDonald, principal for the last three years, said students have settled into the building that will be Fairmont Heights High School until renovations are completed in July 1983. The building does not have a full-sized gym for the basketball team, a track for the track team or even room for their accumulated trophies.

“There was a lot of apprehension coming here, because a lot of students did not know what they would find,” McDonald said. Kent Junior High closed two years ago. “This place was basically a shell,” McDonald continued.”It was just an empty building that needed cleaning. All of the students desks, et cetera, had been taken out. Let the record show that the maintenance department did an incredible job. Everyone has been pleasantly surprised.”

Fairmont Heights High School was created to consolidate the student bodies of several smaller secondary schools for blacks. Doswell E. Brooks, then supervisor of Negro schools for Prince George’s County under Maryland’s dual school system, asked Gholson to run the new institution. At the time, Gholson was principal of the Phoenix School, a teacher-training high school on the campus of Hampton Institute in Hampton, Va.

“We set out to be the best we could be. It’s amazing what we did in those 19 years,” said Gholson, who left the school in 1968 and retired from the system in 1979. “It was assumed that just because a school was black it had to be inferior. It was an oversimplification.

During its first years, Fairmont Heights was attended by two-thirds of the black high school students in the county. They were bused from as far as Accekeek in the south, Bowie in the east and Laurel in the north. The remaining black students went to the older, smaller Frederick Douglas High School in Upper Marlboro, whose original building now is used for office space.

Gholson felt, “If you’re going to have a good school, you have to continually involve your teachers in the kind of activities that will make them grow.” He brought in specialists such as Harold Alberty of Ohio State University and Miriam Goldberg and Harry Passow of Columbia University -- nationally recoginized experts in the “core program” method of teaching -- to work with his handpicked, all-black faculty.

The core method, used at the time only in a few private schools, set aside three-hour blocks of time for students and teachers to tackle problems by using the Socratic dialogue approach. They took up issues such as “the good life,” the morality of peace and war and the nature of economic relations in a democratic society. Gholson said his goal was to instill in his students three basic things: a belief in the dignity of the individual, methods of intelligent problem solving and how to cooperate in solving common problems for the common good.

Twenty years after his graduation from Fairmont Heights, state Sen. Tommie Broadwater (D-Prince George’s) still remembers Fairmon’ts goals: “We believed in the worth and dignity of every individual,” said the senator, who is lobbying for additional state funds to give Fairmont Heights it first Auditorium. “They wanted to show us that we had to have pride in ourselves. Every time I make a speech, I come back to that. It helped me keep myself together.”

Gholson said that out-of-state and foreign visitors were common at Fairmont in those years, adding, “People outside of the country knew more of what was happening at Fairmont Heights than (those) inside. There was so very little contact with the white schools.”

Gholson’s core programs were phased out with integration in the early 1960s to make the school’s academic program conform to the countywide curriculum.

But Fairmont still was a standout in track, and to a lesser degree in basketball, both before and after the interscholastic sports in the early 1960s. According to principal McDonald, Fairmont Heights has won the state track championship in 11 of the past 13 years.

Many blacks holding higher administrative positions in the county schools come from the all-black faculty of Fairmont Heights. They include Parthenia Pruden, assistant superintendent for southern area school; Walter Battle and Lorenzo Robinson, principals of Suitland and DuVal high schools; and Myrtle Frentess, a specialist in curriculum development. Gholson was assistant superintendent for northern area schools before he retired.

Gholson and Franklin agree that in a sense, integration hurt Fairmont by allowing its most talented faculty members to advance and by dispersing others throughout the school system to achieve racial balance. Often these teachers were replaced at Fairmont by less experienced personnel.

“I don’t see us ever having recovered. Those were teachers who had a lot of years invested in the building and in the profession,” Franklin said.

With shifting residential patterns, the student population at Fairmont has risen from 46 percent to 71 percent black since 1973. Franklin believes that the postintegration generation of black students does not properly appreciate the struggles of the ‘60s and ‘70s to ensure educational opportunities.

Franklin said she remains at the school to remind her students of the days when, “You could go into any area of Washington, D.C., and say, ‘I am a student at Fairmont Heights’, and it meant something, set little bells going off in people’s heads. It’s still true to some degree.