Advocate pushes to revive school's segregation-era name

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HARLINGEN — At long last, Lonnie Davis may soon succeed in restoring the name of a school all but lost to obscurity.

Davis is a former student of Booker T. Washington School, where the city’s black children attended classes before the schools were integrated in the late 1950s. The school opened in 1934, local historian Norman Rozef said, and closed in 1959. A sign on the building at the intersection of West Filmore Avenue and H Street now reads Harlingen Head Start Center.

But there’s no sign that designates the building’s origins, and Davis would like to remedy that omission. In fact, he’s been working for 30 years to have the building’s original name recorded there.

“Everybody just poo-pooed me off to say they’re going to do something and then they never did,” said Davis, owner of Finance and Insurance Systems at the corner of Van Buren Avenue and K Street.

Progress could be coming.

“George (McShan) called me (recently) and said he was going to do it,” Davis said. “So that’s a step in the right direction.”

McShan, a member of the Harlingen school board, said he planned to place the issue on the Jan. 15 school board agenda.

McShan said the history of the school relates to the Plessy vs. Ferguson case in 1896. In that case, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed for “separate but equal” schools. In the Brown vs. Board of Education case in 1954, the court ruled that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional.

Harlingen integrated its schools in the late 1950s and the Booker T. Washington School was closed.

McShan learned about Davis’ efforts from Kenneth Benton, who knows Davis and McShan, plus board members Greg Powers, Gerry Fleuriet and Cesar Maldonado.

Benton said that because he was acquainted with those board members, he was asked to get involved in the effort to put the original name back on the school.

He said when one of the elders of the African-American community, Nora Sims, nearly died several weeks ago, people began to realize that many of Booker T. Washington’s alumni were dying. The building, they feel, needs its original name restored before anyone else dies.

Originally, Davis said, the school only went through the eighth grade, and students who wanted to complete their education had to go to other cities.

“They found relatives in San Antonio and Corpus Christi if you wanted to finish your education,” he said. “My mother was one of those people.”

His mother, he said, went to high school in San Antonio.
“I started school there in 1948 and at that time it was going to the 12th grade,” he said.

Davis himself graduated from Harlingen High School in 1961. He recalls that at his 20th reunion, there were plaques for each elementary school.

Students from each school could stand and hold their plaque, but there were no plaques for the Booker T. Washington School or the Alamo School.

The Booker T. Washington School was attended strictly by African-American students. The Alamo School was for Mexican-American students.

Another man at the reunion went to the Alamo School.

Rozeff said the Alamo School was actually the first school built in Harlingen.

“It later became the Mexican school,” he said. “It didn’t have a name. It was just called the Mexican school.” Rozeff said it eventually became the Alamo School, but it was still the school attended by local Mexican-American students.

Davis said that at the reunion he and the man who’d attended the Alamo School found some cardboard in a garbage can. Using the cardboard, they created their own signs with the names of their schools and placed them on some poles.

“We stood up and everybody else had nice printed signs, and we had one that said ‘Alamo School’ and mine said ‘Booker T. Washington,’” Davis said.

He and the former Alamo student made a pact that they needed to learn the history of the schools.

“Why would they just wipe us out?” he said. “There’s no history that they ever existed.”

The Alamo student has since died, but Davis is still carrying the torch. He said he might attend the Jan. 15 school board meeting if he thinks there’s a chance the school board will agree to place the name back on the building.

“You’ll see me stand up and scream like hell if they don’t do it,” he said.

McShan, however, believed action would be taken in time for Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Jan. 21.

“I really think so,” he said. “That’s what I am pushing for. (Martin Luther King Jr. Day) will be the following Monday.”

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Travis M. Whitehead writes for the Valley Morning Star in Harlingen.