
Article appearing in: The Star Press
Date of article: April 10, 2006
Page: News, 1A
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Farewell to 'Noah's Ark' for black kids

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MUNCIE -- The community formally bid farewell on Sunday to the South Madison Community Center, which has served as a Noah's Ark for inner-city black youths since 1964.

Director Dee Harris didn't know whether one person or 100 people would turn out to remember the building and embrace the transition to a new structure, which will take two or three years to plan, finance and build.

More than 100 people attended. During songs, dances and speeches, they thanked God for the building many consider sacred, where black children from the Industry Neighborhood have gone after school to read, play games and confide in mentors.

The building occupies land that once housed what was then known as the city's colored swimming pool and the former colored YMCA building.

"I remember we could go to the 'Y' downtown but we couldn't participate," recalled Pastor Renzie Abram, who came to Muncie in 1946 from Mississippi. "We couldn't play ping-pong, pool; we couldn't swim, but we could be there."

Mayor Dan Canan said: "I remember. . . seeing South Madison (Community Center) as a sanctuary. That's back when Munsyana Homes was in full gear. There was a lot of crime on the street, a lot of drugs on the street, a lot of shootings going on, the pool hall, Bob's tavern.

"But this was a safe place for the kids to go. And they knew when they came inside they didn't have to worry about the bullets outside and the drug dealing and the prostitution. People should not have to live in an environment where this is going on in the streets of Muncie, Indiana."

As a result, the community center is being torn down for an urban renewal project -- the ongoing construction of Millennium Place. It is replacing the distressed, barracks-style Munsyana Homes public housing complex with a mixed-income, New Urbanism community of beautiful apartments, duplexes, quads, and single-family homes with front porches.

Until a new community center is built in Heekin Park behind Garfield Elementary School, the community center will operate out of the school. Canan says a new community center will be completed in 18 months.

Guillermo Rodriguez, director of the Muncie Housing Authority, said of the new community center: "Whatever structure we build, it's not only the history which we all will carry in our hearts, but the programs and the people and the spirit you have shown here this afternoon, that is what I have to carry over to the new building."

Van Johnson, director of planning and development for the Muncie Housing Authority, called the existing community center, which will remain open until June 1, "a treasured site."

"Yes, this building will come down, but the institution will never be destroyed," Johnson said. "We certainly don't want to lose anything in the transition. I can see this place to some of you has been like a second home. I pledge to you that you will not be forgotten. Your ideas, your vision, your dream will be taken into consideration. You will not be set aside and ignored."

The new community center, which Johnson said would become nationally significant, will open no later than the spring of 2009, he said.

The pastor of Union Chapel Ministries, Gregg Parris, who is also a director of the board of the community center, was honored with a standing ovation for his tireless dedication to keeping the center's doors open.

He called the center a modern-day Noah's Ark, a place of refuge, safety, and deliverance.

"This is holy ground," Parris added. "It's a sacred place. It is right for us to pause and give God thanks for such a wonderful and precious place. It's also right to grieve, to feel a sense of loss. This event, my hope is, will provide a means by which we can hold each other, hold onto our faith and hold onto our future. So that we are determined together to see all of the ... values and history that has made the South Madison Community Center such a sacred place will continue on into the future."

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