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### **Miracle In Surry County**

***This rural Virginia community was once known as Sorry Surry for the sad state of its public schools. But since Blacks began turning out for elections and school-board meetings and volunteering with students, test scores have risen, the number of college-bound graduates has more than tripled, and Surry is sorry no more***

By Katti Gray

Her body quivering just slightly with nervousness, Chaquita Claiborne steps from among the uniformed members of the award-winning Cougar marching band. She pivots to face a room brimming with folks assembled to hear which victories the Surry High School musicians, flag girls, majorettes and dram majors have snagged in several recent contests. Planting her feet to stay steady, Chaquita clears her throat twice, stifles a grin and, in a voice thick with the cadence of this country snatch of Virginia that birthed her, she delivers a halting schoolgirl's pitch.

"Um-uhm--parents, community and friends. There are needs we have. Such as our uniforms, our flags. This tar here, dry-cleaning will not remove it. Our flags, they have holes in them. However, these defects do not cause us not to be able to carry on. But--we have had these uniforms for six years. We are asking that, we are hoping that, we are asking that--um-uhm--well, we're asking if you could consider us in the budget next year."

The roomful of adults applauds. Someone throws out an amen. "We're small but we have a big heart," says a beaming Alvin Wilson, II, director of the band (which has a single White member). And, at least in the last few years, this school district has developed a resolve large enough to produce not just an award-winning band but a community spirit that has catapulted Surry from the very bottom of Virginia's academic heap. Today, on state exams, the 1,300-student, three-school district ranks above roughly half of all the state's districts on standardized tests.

Roy Lane, a security guard, is one of four Blacks on the five-member school board saluting Chaquita and crew this evening, and he agrees to consider the band's request. Like so many seated in the cafeteria for the board's regular meeting--parents, teachers and administrators alike--he was born and reared here. He and his wife, high-school sweethearts, have educated their three children in the public schools in Surry County, an expanse of cotton, soybean, corn and peanut fields in Virginia's Tidewater region.

Lane has vivid recollections of when Surry's needs extended far beyond natty band uniforms. "I can remember slipping in raw sewage," Lane says of the high-school field where he practiced baseball in the late 1960's, the tumble of words falling matter-of-factly from

his lips.

Lane's memory is a metaphor for much of what was wrong with Surry's public schools following so-called desegregation and White flight. "They were a mess," he says. "Most of our teachers weren't certified. I got my high-school diploma but remember sitting in math class my first day of junior college and hearing the instructor say, 'I will present this information briefly because I know you all had it before.' It was supposed to be a review. But it was Greek to me."

Hell-bent on giving their children a better educational start than they had had, Lane and his wife traded Surry in the 1970's for a neighboring community whose schools, they were convinced, were better. In 1982, though, the couple returned home with two children in tow (a third was born in 1983) and hopes high. By then, the district once derided as Sorry Surry by its own constituents had begun a dramatic rise from its long-held spot at rock-bottom among Virginia's schools. Blacks account for 68 percent of Surry's student enrollment today and for approximately 55 percent of Surry's residents. Since Black citizens wrested control of education from a White minority that had already swapped desegregated public schools for an all-White private academy, the number of Surry students heading to college or other postgraduate programs has more than tripled.

The turnaround was largely driven by Black parents weary of being political outsiders in a predominantly Black county. Today they not only send their kids to the schools they pay for, like most parents, but they also dominate the county commission, which allots educational funding, and the school board, which decides how to spend the dollars in the classroom.

It Takes a Village ...

At a time when tales of failing Black public school students reverberate across the nation, when the most frustrated Black parents are erecting their own private academies, Surry is symbolic of what can happen when a community galvanizes to remedy a bad situation. In Surry's particular twist on parental involvement, the very people who entrust their children and grandchildren to public schools frequently are the same folks who administer education, teach kids, volunteer and even drive school buses.

"When I went to work, we all went together," says Bernette Wooden, a widow who has driven schoolchildren for 29 years. "It made me feel that much closer to the school system." Initially she hauled the five kids she was left to raise alone after her young husband died in a farm accident. Now her daily passengers include the two "yes, ma'am/no, ma'am" home-trained grandsons she is rearing.

Of course, not every parent is as visible as Mrs. Wooden, and there is substantial room for even more improvements in Surry's schools. But the community's participation has been key to pushing the district up from the bottom.

When C.P. Penn arrived in 1977 as Surry's first Black school superintendent, he inherited a system in shambles. "We had facilities that, when it rained, we had to close down," he says. "If it snowed outside, it snowed inside."

"The counties in this region are still struggling out of Reconstruction," says Stephanie Headley, a parent, former school-board member and former local newspaper reporter who is White. "The difference in Surry--what separates it from surrounding counties that still have major problems--is that Black people took the chance to become leaders."

That coalescing of educators, parents and politicians has produced some measurable results. The number of high-school graduates going on to college, vocational and other programs--a fraction of them join the military--jumped from 25 percent in the late 1970's to about 90 percent currently. The year the Lanes came back home, disbelieving state officials actually ordered Surry's kids to retake a state math-and-reading exam on which they scored unusually well. State officials were emphatic that the students could not have made such a leap in so short a span of time. Twenty-five years ago, Surry's kids tested far below the national norm, ranging from the seventeenth to twenty-seventh percentile among elementary students. Today test scores of Surry's third and fifth graders are in the fifty-fifth and forty-seventh percentiles, respectively.

As change has swept the district, some Whites have returned, but Blacks still account for 68 percent of enrollment. In addition to holding four of the five school-board seats, Blacks also have four of five slots on the county board of supervisors. A nuclear power plant built by Virginia Power and completed in 1972 has become Surry County's richest taxpayer and largest single employer; it now supplies the bulk of school funds that the board of supervisors dispenses.

### Stepping Up to the Challenge

A ferry ride from Williamsburg across the James River, not far from where the first 20 Africans disembarked in the New World as indentured servants, Surry remains a country kind of place. Its people--the population hovers around 6,100--still wave greetings to a stranger rambling along back roads in a rented vehicle. Here, where daily pleasantries are passed across boundaries of race, class and generation, a White restaurant hostess old enough to be your mother will call a youngish Black woman "ma'am."

Surry boasts a sizable group descended from comparatively privileged, landowning free Blacks, but it also counts Black parents who still do shift work in places like the navy yards of nearby Newport News and hotels of colonial Williamsburg. Some, like their forebears, remain tenant farmers.

The gray-haired Hardy brothers, Walter, 71, and Thomas, 68, have spent their lives here and sent their children and some of their grandchildren to Surry's schools. Before retiring,

Waiter was a supervisor at a meat-packing company, and Thomas, a supervisor at a naval shipyard. These men, locals say, were the first homegrown activists to sign up for duty when organizers from the Washington, D.C.-based National Association for the Southern Poor (now known as the National Community Development Organization) landed in Surry. Executive director Don Anderson, who is Black, arrived in 1968 to work with local citizens to solve the community's problems with the school system, local health care and the lack of recreational facilities. The Hardys and others tilled the soil, making the seeds of political organizing Anderson planted bear fruit.

"I didn't want to become involved here but I had no choice," says Walter Hardy, who now runs a local convenience store during his so-called retirement. "Coming up, we saw White kids getting on the school bus while we were walking. We wanted things to be different for our children."

In a community where most every adult works by necessity, they strategized on the telephone and in meetings after hours, preached their message from pulpits and said it again at the ballot box. As a result, by the early 1970's, 90 percent of the county's eligible voters were registered, 60 percent of them Black. From this successful voter-registration drive, a tiny revolution ensued, resulting in Blacks winning political control.

When the Supreme Court ordered schools desegregated in 1954, Surry's all-White school board simply closed the White high school because White students had decamped to an all-White private academy that had been set up. The school board then continued to run a substandard predominantly Black public school system. In 1977 Black citizens, armed with their votes, pressed the board--now with two Black members--to replace Surry's White school superintendent (who had been principal of the White public high and headmaster of the White private academy) with someone who looked like them.

The board hired Penn as the first Black schools chief. Penn had been equipped to take on the Surry County challenge by his previous position: As principal at Prince Edward County High School in Farmville, Virginia, from 1969 to 1977, he had worked to reorganize the Prince Edward County public school system, which had been closed down completely from 1959 through 1964 to avoid integration.

Penn says commonsense maneuvers rallied community support in Surry: He ensured that every teacher was certified and that parents felt welcome inside classrooms. He invited parents to the school. He also took the schools to the people, so to speak, through a federally funded program called The Connection, in which a bus equipped with computers and teachers visited locations throughout the county and taught parents and other adults how to use computers, providing activities for children as well. (Because of cutbacks in federal funds, the program, which had run for eight years, ceased operation. The district enlarged its night-school program and residents began flocking to the school instead.) Surry also tested its students to see where they stood academically, and supported programs to take them to museums, science contests and other places they had never gone

before.

### From Dilapidated to High-Tech

A first order of business was providing clean, safe buildings that made kids feel they mattered and had reason to show up for class. Two years before Penn arrived, a new high school with an indoor gymnasium had already gone up, after the community had lobbied for it for decades--so students could have indoor physical-education classes and stop playing basketball outside in winter. Every school got its own cafeteria, avoiding what had been the daily transport of meals by bus.

In 1995 the L.P. Jackson Middle School opened. Its centerpiece was a glassed-in technology lab, which included stations that emit laser signals to trigger the operation of one gadget or another; an aerospace center testing the effect of wind on various objects; and equipment to grow plants hydroponically (with water and light, but no soil).

"We're making a real big city," says eighth grader Herbert M. Pierce, IV, his cursor darting across a computer screen flashing the simulated city he's building in the lab. "We've got a football field, so people will pay money, pay taxes. This is our airport. This is our seaport. And here we're going to make another airport. More money--"

"So we can pay off the debt," chimes in classmate Alvin Clayton, Herbert's pal since second grade.

Rita Holmes, who graduated from Surry schools, put her own children and those of her late sister through them, came back as a teacher and now is Jackson's principal, one among a cadre of top-level Surry administrators that now includes five Blacks and one White.

At the elementary school, Marlenia Pulley, still in the security guard's uniform that she wears on her job, is helping her youngest child and his classmates staple construction-paper spiders. Her husband, Douglas Pulley, teaches at the middle school. "This is a county that is always on a tight budget. So I usually come two or three times a week, just to volunteer," says Pulley, who has two other school-age children. "Also, seeing what they do here helps me to deal with my children at home."

### The Road Ahead

Still, Surry is not a perfect place. Although drugs and violence have yet to intrude on the county's school life in any substantial way, county sheriff deputies periodically show up at the school buildings with drug-sniffing dogs as a preventive measure. A visit to the middle school will show the brainiacs of an accelerated prealgebra class for seventh-graders. The class also includes three especially bright sixth graders. All but ten of the 25 students are Black. But the seven teen and preteen students in another class are struggling with basic

arithmetic, adding one plus one, one plus two and so on, on the chalkboard. "Come on," the instructor coaxes. "We're s'posed to know this stuff."

The juxtaposition is clear. After yearly surges in standardized test scores, the overall performance of Surry students has plateaued, at least since the early 1990's, with the youngest pupils consistently outscoring those in the middle and high schools.

"We're not at the bottom anymore, but we are certainly not at the top," says LaVerne Daniels, who succeeded Penn this past July. Daniels's faith in Surry's potential for moving further along is fired by what she calls the spirit of Surry's people. "When you have an awards program for attendance and academics, the parents pack the house. Many of them don't even have a child in the school anymore, but they are there. That's unique. The school is the "community here; the community is the school."

While there are test scores and other academic markers to address, the list of concerns does not end there. Elected officials have their own political divisions. There are budgetary gaps. Even more parents should take part, educators say, no matter the constraints on their time. The teen pregnancy rate has gone up and down and up again. Some Black residents applaud the return of White students and the prospect of sharing political power with White adults; others fear Blacks might lose their grip on Surry.

"The past is the past," says Reginald Harrison, a parent, county supervisor and middle manager with tobacco giant Philip Morris. "The only thing we can do is to challenge parents to become even more active than they have been, to learn about the budget process, how taxes are spent."

Such tensions barely surface on Kristie King's schoolgirl radar. A junior honor student, she has Spelman College on her mind, she says by way of introducing herself. Her mama has told her all about the depths from which Surry schools have risen, she adds, falling into her own rapid-fire recitation: "Before Dr. Penn came, everybody thought of Surry County as Sorry County. Right now, the surrounding counties really envy us. Now, we are special in Surry."

Many throughout this region share King's view. Roy Lane concurs, but only to a point. Surry, he says, should not be the exception among floundering Black school districts. "What we have done," he said, "is possible anyplace."