

The untold story of St. Joseph's Project subject of new book

Posted by [TBN_Charles](#) On 09/02/2014



Mike McCauley and Geraldine Medley-June in front of St. Joseph's Park on Loveville Road. McCauley is writing a book about African-Americans who formed their own community in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Helene Herbert Holt lost her wedding ring the day she and her husband, Kelly, moved into their house on Route 234 in Clements in 1946.

"I never did find it," she said.

Thirteen years later, her husband was killed in an explosion at the Indian Head Naval Base.

"There was another man killed with him," she recalled. "Kelly had just signed the contract that day to have siding put on the house."

As compelling as Helene's story is, her house has a story of its own.

Nestled in St. Mary's County between Morganza, Loveville and Oakville are the roots of this untold story, remarkable in its depth and scope, a tale of perseverance, of African-Americans seeking to better themselves just after the Second World War, who, during a time of segregation, quietly rose up to establish a lasting legacy for future generations.

Helene's father, Scanlon Herbert, established the St. Joseph's Welfare Club the same year she got married, part of a three-phase project to help their neighbors who were in some cases housing up to a dozen inhabitants.

"There was some places had thirteen people all living together," said Geraldine Medley-June, who still lives in the house her parents built as part of St. Joseph's Project.

The overall effort realized its beginnings from the simplest of acts, when a Jesuit priest from Rochester, NY—Father Michael Kavanaugh S.J.—came to St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Morganza to attend his assigned congregation.

Spoken of with reverence even today, Kavanaugh had to make do with little, but nonetheless took a keen interest in his African-American parishioners, who at this time were delegated to the back of the church. Their poverty was evident, but he found their faith astounding.

What happened next became Mike McCauley's passion. For the past 10 years, McCauley has labored over "Justice Rolls Down," a book focusing on the intricate stories that all put together tell the complex and endearing story of St. Joseph's Project.

The title, he explained, was a quote from an Old Testament prophet.

Homes for the hauling

If you're driving south on Route 5 through Morganza where the highway intersects Route 242, St. Joseph's Catholic Church sits dominant and stark on the great hill behind you. As you head south from there on Route 5, you go down a hill past the intersection. The building you see as you crest the next hill on the right hand side is a large white apartment complex. This structure, not so long ago, was St. Joseph's Colored School.

In 1946, Father Kavanaugh needed a classroom for kindergarten students at the school.

"Someone told him about these surplus barracks left over from World War II at Fort Meade," McCauley said. "So they went up there and got one of the old barrack houses for the kindergarten students. Troops lived in them while they were being trained during the war."

Scanlon Herbert got to thinking, why not bring some of these houses to his community as homes for the African-American parishioners who were so clearly in need? The Army was giving them away. He talked to Kavanaugh, who agreed. There were 13 houses eventually disassembled and brought down to St. Mary's County from Fort Meade.

William Holt, who was janitor at St. Joseph's Church for 12 years, placed his house behind the old school in Morganza. Originally a four-room structure, Holt added onto to it in the years since it was moved to St. Mary's in the late 1940s. It was his brother, Kelly, who married Helene and died in the accident at Indian Head in 1959.

Helene grew up on her father's farm with three sisters. Her brothers were all toddlers then.

"The boys were all too young to do any work, so me and my sisters had to do all of it," she said. "We worked as hard as any man."

When she and Kelly got married and were provided with one of the old barracks houses, she was well prepared for housekeeping. Like many of those interviewed for this article, her staunch Catholic faith was evident. When she came out to greet us, she said she'd just been in the house saying her Rosary.

McCauley said that the intent of the St. Joseph's Project was not only to provide homes, but land where the parishioners could grow a garden and have space for chickens and pigs.

"They wanted the people to be self-sufficient," he said.

Medley-June pointed behind her parent's house and recalled the hog pens and garden that is now undergrowth. She also recalled the old skating rink, still standing on Kavanaugh Road, where community children found relief from boredom.

"At night when our parents went to sleep, we would sneak out and go skating," she said. "If the parents had ever woke up, the entire community would have found they were missing their children. We would all be at the skating rink."

While the first phase of St. Joseph's Project provided 13 families with homes, the next chapter was a little more "iffy." The second phase of the housing effort came about when the purchased a block maker from Sears Roebuck taught some of the African-American parishioners how to make cinderblocks to build houses from.

"Apparently, it didn't go smoothly," McCauley noted. "The blocks were too uneven."

The uneven blocks proved to be too challenging of a building material. Although two survived, McCauley refers to one such structure, tucked away on a dirt lane off Route 247.

"I don't think it's changed at all," he said.

Some failed attempts using the uneven cinderblocks were torn down and the material reused to build foundations for other houses.

The St. Joseph's Welfare Club

Phase III of St. Joseph's Project evolved from Helene's father, Scanlon Herbert, who along with his brother McKinley and Mr. Johnny Somerville decided they would attempt to purchase a 115-acre farm for sale along Route 247.

In order for the men to buy it, the Archdiocese of Washington agreed to provide the capital.

The money was slow in coming, however, so in 1951, the three men pooled their resources and came up with the \$6,500 they needed to purchase the land. All were eventually reimbursed by the archdiocese. The houses built from this purchase are still owned by the families of those who constructed them more than 60 years ago.

"Each one has its own story," McCauley said. "Mr. Somerville had a store and a big farm. He bought a lot at a tax sale then sold it for \$50 to one of the families. Delia Fenwick worked for Summerseat Farm for years. The owners gave her five acres as a wedding present. When her son needed a lot, she gave him an acre."

McCauley told the story of Rose Forbes, an African-American parishioner who worked for the sisters at St. Joseph's for very low pay.

"When Father Kavanaugh found out how low her salary was, he went to the Archdiocese," McCauley said. "He told the bishop, 'this woman has been underpaid, but we can make her whole by giving her a lot.' Someone had deeded two lots to the church. She got one of them."

There are 40 houses in St. Joseph's Park from the third phase of the project, two block houses from the second phase and the 13 barracks houses from the first phase, all brought about by the St. Joseph's Welfare Club. Children and grandchildren acquired lots from the original lots, placing a total of 66 houses in the project.

"It all worked out for everyone," Medley-June said.

The program eventually ran aground in the 1950s when First National Bank of St. Mary's, the primary lender for the houses built during the third phase, decided to withdraw lending.

"I guess they decided they could make more money lending to the big developers," McCauley said.

'Too busy to worry about all that'

The astounding aspect of the efforts of the St. Joseph's Welfare Club was that their accomplishments were achieved despite an underlying prejudice that pervaded St. Mary's County during that time.

"I don't remember us having any problems," Medley-June recalled. "Mrs. Herbert, who worked for the church, once said, 'We were too busy to worry about all that.'"

Scouring the minutes of the St. Joseph's Welfare Club, McCauley found an amazing entry where the members discussed if the new development would be open to all races and religions.

"According to the minutes, they agreed the development would be open to all people," he said. "The only non-African-American to take advantage of this decision was an American Indian, Ralph Brooks, aka Chief Eagle Hawk, who said he had a thousand dollars and was willing to invest in a house. He must not have stayed long, because a year later someone else took the house."

A newspaper article published in The Southern Cross out of Savannah, GA in 1950 reveals that Turkey Tayak, Saginaw chief of the Piscataway Indians, who was descended from Kittamaquund, baptized by Father Andrew White in Colonial Maryland, played a significant role in getting more than a dozen native Americans baptized in the church.

According to the article, Tayak was living in Morganza at the time and professed his own Catholicism. He invited 16 Lumbee Indians to Morganza, where they lived for six months while Kavanaugh instructed them in the Roman Catholic doctrine. They were baptized by the priest into the ancient faith during a large ceremony.

The following day, Tayak took the newly converted to Historic St. Mary's City to show them the land where his ancestor's baptism took place.

Another interesting result of the St. Joseph's Project was the establishment of the nearby King and Kennedy Estates subdivision, which McCauley said was an offshoot of the project.

"Many children from the families at St. Joseph's Project were involved in that development and live there to this day," he noted.

Contact Joseph Norris at joe.norris@thebaynet.com