

Auburn students thankful for Shiloh's lessons

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This past summer was the start of a very exciting endeavor for the students of the Design Build Masters Program at Auburn University. We were asked by Liz Sims, the director of the Shiloh Community Restoration Foundation, to help with the rehabilitation of the historic Shiloh Rosenwald School in Notasulga.



Students of the Design Build Masters Program at Auburn University have been working with SCRF President Liz Sims, far right, to renovate the Shiloh Rosenwald School in Notasulga.

We embraced the project and immediately went to work, exploring the possible unknowns that we would be faced with -- not knowing then that the journey would reveal many unanticipated ones as well.

All 12 of the students in the program decided to take on the challenge and restore the school in honor of the community for which it is known. Under the direction of Professors D.K. Ruth and Anthony Tindill, the project has given us a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to invigorate the life of the old school house and the community as well.

From the time that Ms. Sims made her first visit to our studio, it became evident to us that this project would be much more than a typical restoration. She told us great stories from the time she was a student at Shiloh and she also enlightened us about the appalling history that took place there.

Hearing the stories motivated us to establish the school as a place not only for learning, but also for remembrance for those whose personal history ran deep within the walls. It was then that we made it a priority to never forget the roots that are so entwined within the school and to use them as the building blocks for the future.

Getting started

The first meeting with Ms. Sims was followed by all of us attending a monthly meeting at Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church. As Reverend Dunlap blessed the food and the project that we were about to embark on, we all felt the spirit of Shiloh come over us like a wave of motivation.

It was then that we all truly realized the importance of the work that we would be doing at Shiloh and how it has the ability to impact so many in such a positive way. Since then, our attendance at the church meetings has been a regular occurrence and a way for us to involve the members of the church in the restoration process.

We kicked off the project with an intense design process -- called a charette -- in which we worked with Ms. Sims to determine what type of function the new building would serve and what would be needed to complete this objective. Ms. Sims expressed the need for an area with access to computers, a restroom, a museum that could house all of Shiloh's historical artifacts and also a gathering space that could be used for events such as church meetings.

We then took those requests and devised a plan in which all of those needs could be met, while also creating a master plan for the entire Shiloh property.

Once the design had been developed to a certain degree, we decided to start the construction process by installing a sign that exemplified all that we hoped to accomplish with the project. In September, we started the demolition of the front room of the school, which will become a technology center that will serve the surrounding community.

The entire front room has been through a complete restoration process from floor to ceiling, greatly improving the structural soundness of the building and the aesthetics of it as well. The design process has involved balancing elements of the future, which reflect the advancements of technology, while also speaking to the past to emphasize the journey that education has taken over the years.

Our overall goal is to transform the old classroom into an area that will encourage learning and motivation for all that use the facility.

Outside help

The project has been a success so far due to the collaboration among the Design Build students and various individuals including Dick Hudgins, a historical consultant, and additional input from members of the Alabama Historical Commission. The consultants visited the site to help us find the delicate balance between keeping the historical character of the building intact, while providing modern updates such as Internet connections, to the space.

From the earliest stages of the project, current students from Tuskegee University have played an important role in the construction and restoration of the building. During the demolition process, we were surprised when we unearthed handmade bricks that were later found to be the bricks that Tuskegee students made when the building was first being constructed in the 1920s.

We plan to integrate the handmade bricks into the design and use them as flooring in both of the bathrooms. It is unique history like this that makes this project so amazing to be involved in.

The restoration of the school has also attracted the interest of Rex Perry, the homes editor for Southern Living Magazine. He visited Shiloh bearing gifts of tools, which he donated to the Shiloh Community Restoration Foundation.

The tools will help the restoration of the school continue until its completion, which

we are all very happy about.

Mr. Perry spent a couple of days with us photographing our progress and talking with all of us about what our experience has been like during this project. The story is set to appear in the July issue of Southern Living.

This has been unbelievable for all of us and we hope that the credit will be attributed to Ms. Sims and all of the hard work that she has done over the years for Shiloh.

Looking back . . . and forward

"I do not know where we would be without the help of the Auburn University Master's Level Design Build students," Sims said. "They are an exceptional group and they have the biggest hearts of any young people I have seen.

"They thank me often for letting them be a part to this project, and I feel that I should be thanking them. They are excited about helping us and appreciate the historical significance of this project not only to this community, but to this country.

"Once the project is complete, a plaque will be place in the restored building with each of their names and to be permanently displayed. We have been so blessed to have them as a part of this project."

This project has been an amazing experience for all of those that have been involved. From our point of view, working on the Shiloh School has given us so many skills. Not only have we learned to rebuild a wall and install sheetrock, but we have also discovered the skill of being able to work together as a team and accomplish the goals that we set for ourselves.

The reality of getting to take the design that Ms. Sims helped us create and actually implement it is what makes the Design-Build Masters Program so unique. It is what also drew so many of us to the program.

We are students with backgrounds in everything from architecture to economics, and this project has brought our diverse backgrounds together to create not only a remarkable design-build team, but also relationships that will last forever.

We will all graduate from the program in May and will go our separate ways, but none of us will forget the lessons we learned from Shiloh and from each other.