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Oral history recording part of larger project to renovate neighborhood

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By NICK SLOAN, Kansan Staff Writer

Most kids spent their Spring Break relaxing. But a handful of students from Sumner Academy of Arts and Science were undertaking a project to learn and record the history of the Douglass-Sumner neighborhood in Kansas City, Kan.

A dozen students from the school are participating in DASH - the Douglass And Sumner Heritage project - by interviewing 25 residents in KCK who have a connection to the neighborhood. The project, sponsored by Greater Kansas City LISC and with funding help from State Farm and Kaw Valley Arts and Humanities, introduces students to the history of the neighborhood.

The area was the birthplace of famous jazz musician Charlie Parker, physician A. Porter Davis and Wyandotte County District Court Judge Cordell Meeks, Jr., among others.

Julie Porter, executive director of Greater Kansas City LISC, said DASH was introduced to maintain some of the history of the area.

"It was a neighborhood idea," Porter said. "They wanted a neighborhood memorial. It is a project that celebrates the history of the neighborhood and it celebrates the histories of the current Sumner Academy students and residents."

Officials from LISC, the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and the Kansas City, Kan., Public Schools District have been involved in discussions concerning the renovation of



Sumner Academy senior Melissa Villalobos (left) interviewed Kansas City, Kan., resident Josephine Boone this week as part of the DASH project. Sumner Academy students were paired with a handful of residents who either lived in the area in the past or still do. A renovation plan for the Douglass-Sumner neighborhood of KCK has been created by Greater Kansas City LISC.

Kansan photo by NICK SLOAN

the Douglass-Sumner area. New housing, infrastructure and renovation addressing quality of life are slated for the neighborhood. Sumner Academy of Arts and Sciences and the former Sumner High School are located within the neighborhood's boundaries. Douglass Elementary School is also there.

The renovation plan centers around four central points: organizational development, community infrastructure, the Jersey Creek Redevelopment District and housing. Maintaining the history of the neighborhood is also a cornerstone of the plan, resulting in the organization of DASH.

Porter said along with preserving the neighborhood's history, students will benefit from the project.

"Diversity is a key element of the curriculum at Sumner Academy," Porter said. "Students get to learn about their own history. Students are also learning about developing leadership skills and the ability to advocate for something getting done."

During the DASH project, students will produce documentaries and exhibits, and some will be presented throughout the neighborhood. A historic walking tour of the area will be arranged with signage and pedestrian markers.

Sumner Academy seniors Melissa Villalobos and Joshua Williams interviewed current and former residents this week. They asked residents questions about their backgrounds and connections to the neighborhood's history.

"The shock to me (was) the community was so different," Villalobos said. "When we started to interview them, it was their community and school. It really has changed."

Many residents interviewed graduated from old Sumner High School, which was later integrated into the current Sumner Academy.

Students were informed of the future plans for renovating the area before jumping into the project. The residents interviewed noticed the change, but in many cases, they welcomed it and encouraged more.

Josephine Boone, who still attends a church in the neighborhood, said the plans should benefit the neighborhood on a long-term basis.

"I think there will be a balance of maintaining the history and improving it because the neighborhood will never be like it once was ever again," she said. "The neighborhood is an area of need for revitalization."

A graduate of Sumner High School, Boone remembers when the current Sumner Academy was located on a hill.

"It took 20 to 30 steps to get to the top of the hill," she said.

Along with residents, current Sumner Academy students also believe the plan will make a positive impact on the area and were excited about LISC's plans.

"There are still people in a small community together," Williams said. "There's so many kids. Being able to find a balance will be important with this generation and the upcoming generation."

"We have seen what they are doing and it will benefit the community and the future," Villalobos said.

The school itself should be a significant focus of the project. New building space is provided under the plan, and the football field would be renovated in an effort to allow the school to play more of its football games there. Additionally, more parking and a fountain monument are included in early renderings of the project. Renovated homes would be structured so residents could watch sporting events from their front porch.

Following the completion of all the interviews, students will develop a permanent public display about the area. According to a press release about DASH, the Wyandotte County Historical Society has expressed interest in archiving the video documentaries.

Since 1990, Greater Kansas City LISC has invested \$89 million in over 5,500 new or renovated homes in both KCK and Kansas City, Mo. About 1.4 million square feet of retail and commercial space, along with 317,000 square feet of community facilities and sports fields, have been renovated or built in plans organized by Greater Kansas City LISC.

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