

Legal Aid is in the house

Rock House rehab project proceeds at a lightning pace



One simple word, written in Magic Marker above a transom at the rear of the structure, tells the whole story of the Rock House: “leave.”

Leave, as in leave intact this piece of the interior that sends light through the historical property across from Washington Park. Leave, as in leave C.B. Holt’s “Rock House” standing 80 years after he built it by hand, stone by stone, from materials quarried from the Rivanna River. Leave, as in leave behind any notions of razing that the once-neglected building may have inspired. For the Rock House, a reminder of Charlottesville’s early 20th-century African-American experience, is firmly ensconced in the next chapter of its vivid history.

Seven months after fundraising officially got underway to restore the house at 1010 Preston Ave. to a functional state, the project—spearheaded by the Legal Aid Justice Center—is more than two-thirds of the way toward its \$230,000 goal. When Legal Aid purchased the former Bruton Beauty Supply building right next door, the Rock House, 30 years out of use, conveyed with the larger property. But for a couple of years, no one had any idea what to do with the one-and-a-half-storey bungalow-like building

that was dank with mildew and rot due to extensive water damage. “I think it really was close to the bulldozer on several occasions,” Legal Aid Executive Director Alex Gulotta says.

But thanks to the confluence of good intentions, dogged research, philanthropy and social idealism, C.B. Holt’s Rock House will see a new life. By next year it will be home to a new pro bono legal practice that joins UVA law students with top-flight area law firm Hunton & Williams under the supervision of Legal Aid to assist people with family law or immigration and asylum cases.

Charles B. Holt was a furniture and umbrella repairman who married late and waited seven years after purchase of the property to construct his stone house on the site directly across from what became Washington Park. The era’s Jim Crow laws disadvantaged Holt as it did other African-Americans at the time, but his sheer determination to make something unique and comparatively stately could not be denied. Indeed, William Hale, who is construction manager for the restoration project, speaks of Holt’s work in glowing terms: “Mr. Holt was trying for a certain substantiality and grace in what was being done. I’ve worked on a lot of rural housing and farmhouses of different economic strata restoring them over the years and I’ve seldom seen one done with as much attention to detail.”

If the unusual stonework of the house weren’t enough to commend it to history (most African-American neighborhoods of the 1920s were built of wood, according to Legal Aid research), the residents who succeeded Holt and his wife ensure the significance of the place. Holt’s step-daughter-in-law, Asalie Minor Preston, a schoolteacher, lived in the house until the 1970s. She endowed a scholarship fund, the Minor-Preston Educational Fund, which continues to give annually up-wards of \$200,000 to low-income, college-bound students.

On the basis of the building’s architectural and social significance, Legal Aid was successful in winning a historic property designation from the City of Charlottesville in March. This development, along with the tireless efforts of advocates Margaret Dunn, who volunteers at Legal Aid, and Kimberly Emery, a dean at UVA Law School who specializes in pro bono and public interest work, helped secure fast funding for the renovation project.

For one, the Perry Foundation, a local charity that gives away about \$1 million annually, has promised to pony up \$60,000 if Legal Aid completes its campaign for the other \$170,000. Two things inspired the pledge, says Gary McGee, the foundation’s vice-president: “One, the significance of the house itself and the structure historically to the black community.

“The topping,” McGee continues, “was when it was firmed up that it would be used for a pro bono project with Hunton & Williams and the law school.”

Indeed, it has been Legal Aid’s hope from the start of the Rock House project that it would land tenants worthy of the structure’s history. The pro bono project, championed by Emery, is the right fit, says Gulotta. “It’s a perfect match,” he says. “I can’t say it any other way.”

“Putting a pro bono partnership in that house with a hand-up instead of a hand-out keeps with the spirit of Charles Holt,” Emery says.

On top of committing a lawyer to the pro bono project full-time, Hunton & Williams has also committed \$20,000 to the Rock House. And George Hettrick, a partner in the firm, says that the location of Legal Aid—and by extension the Rock House—made all the difference in Hunton & Williams coming on board. “We could have rented some garden-variety office space [for pro bono work],” he says. “This location is where all the clinical law students come and that tells me this location is where you go to help people who cannot afford lawyers.”

At present, the house is a skeleton on the inside, with old plaster ripped out and a few rotted joists awaiting their replacements. And though the plan calls for the Rock House to be occupied by the end of the year, there’s still the matter of another \$90,000 that needs to be raised. To that end, July will be a big month for the project. Photographs by Jim Hall, who first captured the Rock House for C-VILLE in November, will be on display at the Charlottesville Community Design Center through that month. A community meeting is scheduled for July 9 at the Zion Union Baptist Church, just up the street on Preston Avenue, and on July 30, in conjunction with the African-American Festival, Legal Aid will give tours of C.B. Holt’s house.

Emery, for one, finds this latest installment in the Rock House story to be uplifting. “Having a chance to save a property like this and put it to this kind of use has been inspiring to us,” she says. “The track this has taken—the stars have aligned.”—*Cathy Harding*