



## FROM THE PRESIDENT'S DESK

**By Shelby Robinson**

*I spoke during the Women Empowering Women's Black History Program, sponsored by Renna Also and located in the John J. Wright Educational and Cultural Center, in February 2025. The Topics were Black Investments in Education, Black Support of Scholarships and Building Generational Wealth. This is a synopsis:*

### **INVESTMENTS in EDUCATION**

On a sunny September morning in the late 1950s, long lines of yellow buses arrived in front of John J. Wright Consolidated School and hundreds of beautiful and neatly dressed five-, six- and seven-year-olds jumped from the buses and ran excitedly up the pearly white concrete steps that led to the entrance of the school auditorium. Those steps seemed to be a major climb for such little people on their first day of school. Some ran to the top in victory just as Sylvester Stallone did in Rocky I. Many gasped as they entered the beautiful brick building, sashayed down the aisles, and saw an auditorium beaming full of Black children of all sizes, colors, backgrounds and varying levels of energy! Soon they were led to classrooms on the elementary side of that consolidated school. They had no concerns about the sacrifices and investments Black church members had made that allowed them to enjoy such a magnificent building in which to learn, to play, to rest, to be nourished, to be loved, guided and cared for by the best teachers and staff in any school in the USA !

They had no inkling that Black church members from Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg area churches had gathered to develop a plan to invest in the first high school for area "Negro" children. They did not care that those Spotsylvania church members decided to build a combined elementary and high school for Blacks in the very center of Spotsylvania, Virginia

instead of building one structure for Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania. ***They never knew as children and had no concern that church members pooled their hard-earned pennies, nickels and dimes to pay around \$1.50 for the land on which Snell Training School was built.*** What was it to them that this first school, founded in 1913 burned down in 1941, and this grand new John J. Wright Consolidated School was built to replace it because county Blacks felt the investment in Black education was always worthwhile?

How could they know that they were destined to be the “***very last all Black class***” to graduate from John J. Wright Consolidated School years later in 1968 or that a few classmates would be the “***very first Black students***” to attend what was once Spotsylvania’s “all - white” schools? Both groups are Spotsylvania’s Black History. We talk of Black heroes, this truth alone shows us that each student, teacher, staff and parent affiliated with the school represents *The Black History Heroes of Spotsylvania County* ! That \$1.50 has been an investment that financed our forefathers, lifted us to current successes and will buoy future students to heights unimaginable !

## **SCHOLARSHIPS**

Eleven years after those first-grade students entered those doors and first traversed the halls of John J. Wright Consolidated School, Mrs. Lillian Hart Brooks called several to report to the Principal’s Office. Mrs. Brooks had been a student, graduated and was hired as everyone’s beloved school secretary. She was so loved that the auditorium into which those students walked that first day was later named after her. I happened to have been one of those students and since I was always obedient, I had no idea why we were being called to the office. That day, “Our Mrs. Brooks” assisted Juniors in completing stacks of forms for some unknown purpose.

Twelve years after those students entered the very front doors of John J. Wright Consolidated School, they passed through those same doors as graduating seniors, and walked down those same aisles, but this time slowly and regally in white and blue graduation gowns and tasseled caps. The mystery of the stacks of forms came to light that day when several graduates were surprised with \$1200 scholarships to various colleges. At that time, \$1200 covered the full year of a Black in-state college education. My hat goes off to Ms. Martha Frye, Mrs. Brooks and the teachers who supported us and believed in us to guide us through the scholarship application process when we and many of our parents knew nothing of scholarships.

## **GENERATIONAL WEALTH BUILDING**

Remember that these students entered a dynamic school whose conception and foundation was built upon an investment of around \$1.50 in 1913! Years later, numerous students received those \$1200 scholarships. Hundreds upon hundreds of other John J. Wright students were taught, tested and prepared for successful careers due to that earlier \$1.50 investment. They worked local and distant jobs, raised families, bought their own land and homes, made investments in the education and career development of others and contributed to the community, state, and national economy. That is tremendous “generational wealth building”.

### ***If our forefathers did, so can we!***

Most think of generational wealth as just having a house, land or business to hand down to family members. It is that, but I feel that it is also a community’s and individual’s love for education and love for the development of each person in the community, whereas there is also a willingness to invest in people for generations to come.

As an example, just one of those graduates used the \$1200 scholarship from their JJW Family as an investment at Virginia State College, then added \$250.00 from an aunt for the first year’s tuition costs and living expenses. The second year, they learned that scholarship emphasis was placed mainly upon Freshmen. Therefore, their father, who was a barber and lumber mill foreman, provided them with quart jars filled with fifty cent pieces, quarters, dimes and nickels that he had saved. This \$600 investment in his child’s education came from a man who was not given the opportunity to complete school in the 1920s and 1930s. The John J. Wright Consolidated School graduate transferred to Mary Washington College where they were provided with grants and scholarships each month if they maintained a B+ average.

*NOTE: The MWC monthly funding was not all government funds so how did other entities provide such funding to cover a year and a half of education?*

### ***If others can, so can we!***

Just consider this math equation: A \$1.50 Investment + a \$1200 VSU Scholarship + Aunt’s \$250 + Father’s \$600 + Monthly MWC Funding = Investments in Lifelong Generational Wealth Building.

That one JJW student spent thirty years empowering and guiding thousands of others towards career, financial and personal successes. The \$1.50 investment from our forefathers has led to many five and six figure salaries. Imagine all the wealth and

successes that have been achieved and generated by the thousands of students that attended John J. Wright Schools!

Let's power forward and offset any possible losses of federal funds or state funding of college educations for our descendants.