

Within a restored house, dreams to take off

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Evenings before he goes home, Johnson C. Smith University President Ron Carter takes a short drive to the corner of Campus and Dixon streets. There, he sits and beams at the work to resuscitate an important Charlotte house left for dead for four decades.

The 122-year-old George C. Davis house, former home of JCSU's first black professor and his beloved educator wife, faced bulldozers many times as it stood proudly – but empty and rotting.

Now, at long last, workers are into the first weeks of an \$800,000 restoration that will bring the Davis house back to life and become a vital piece of Carter's vision for transforming the Beatties Ford Road corridor.

Since June 11, workers for Charlotte's Andrew Roby construction company have torn down the sweeping porch that wasn't a part of the original house, ripped out plaster walls and ceilings that were damaged through the years and peeled off the slate roof.

Restoration complete, the Davis house will be home to administrative offices for Foster Village Network Center, the university's ambitious "holistic" program to guide young adults who, at 18, have aged out of foster care.

Ultimately, JCSU will house and provide financial help to educate high school and college students once in foster care – or touched by social services.

In September, Elon Homes and Schools for Children, a community-based foster care program, plans to begin moving to the JCSU campus and Foster Village with a long-term goal of creating a K-12 pipeline to college, Carter said.

The university will base its social work program in a former Baptist church near the Davis house. There, undergraduate and graduate students will conduct research and work with current and former foster children who'd once been long shots for success.

Since 2007, the program has enrolled 79 students – 26 already graduating with college degrees, Carter said.

Yet 53 days into the restoration, the house is sending Carter a message.

“It says to me the dream is truly a reality, brick by brick,” said Carter, a former foster father of four who recently adopted one of Foster Village’s graduates. “That little house will be the footprint for this entire initiative.”

Nearly torn down

Davis and his wife, Marie G. Davis, a Charlotte teacher and principal, lived in the Queen Anne-style house for 55 years. He started building it in 1891 and expanded it in the early 1900s, wrapping it in brick in 1920.

That year, Davis left JCSU to become the state’s agent for the Julius Rosenwald Fund that built 813 mostly one-room schools for rural black children across North Carolina.

Davis retired in 1935 and he and Marie moved to Greensboro in 1946. They sold the house to the university nine years later.

For years after the Davises left, the house boarded professors. It’s been empty for more than 40 years.

As the house continued to deteriorate, JCSU boarded up windows and ultimately built a chain-link fence around the dwelling. At one point, trustees voted to tear it down and in 2010 the city set out to demolish it.

Providing ‘an uplift’

That is when Carter began to put his Foster Village dream into motion.

He asked the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmarks Commission to lend JCSU restoration money.

Commission officials moved quickly to make that happen, lending the university about \$440,000 that would be paid back in five years.

Under the deal, JCSU deeded the house to the commission, which is restoring it to stringent historical standards. Once the renovations are complete, the commission will deed the Davis house back to the university.

Dan Morrill, a UNC Charlotte historian and the commission's consulting director, is elated with the progress made at the house – and the plans JCSU has for it.

“I’m a big adaptive reuse guy, and I’ve always felt that preservation is at its best when it serves an ongoing community purpose,” Morrill said. “It’s restoring an icon of the neighborhood. It’s improving the neighborhood. It’s going to be an uplift, because it’s going to provide college opportunities for former foster kids.”

He gives Carter much of the credit for saving the Davis house.

“He understands that you achieve more than just saving that house,” Morrill said. “He understands that when you take something that has deteriorated and you, in essence, bring it back, that raises good emotions – there’s a sense of revival and rescue and rebirth.”

Learning ‘at growing edge’

Soon the house will have a new porch, new Sheetrock on the walls and new shingles that resemble slate.

In their 53rd day on Friday, Roby’s workers have 217 more workdays to complete the restoration. It will include an addition on the back and a parking lot.

Carter can’t wait – and he won’t wait.

“As the renovations go on, we’ll move on, too,” he said. “We are the parents to these students now.

“ And when people see that house that George Davis built so long ago, I want them to see these students going in and out learning how to live and learn at their growing edge.”

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