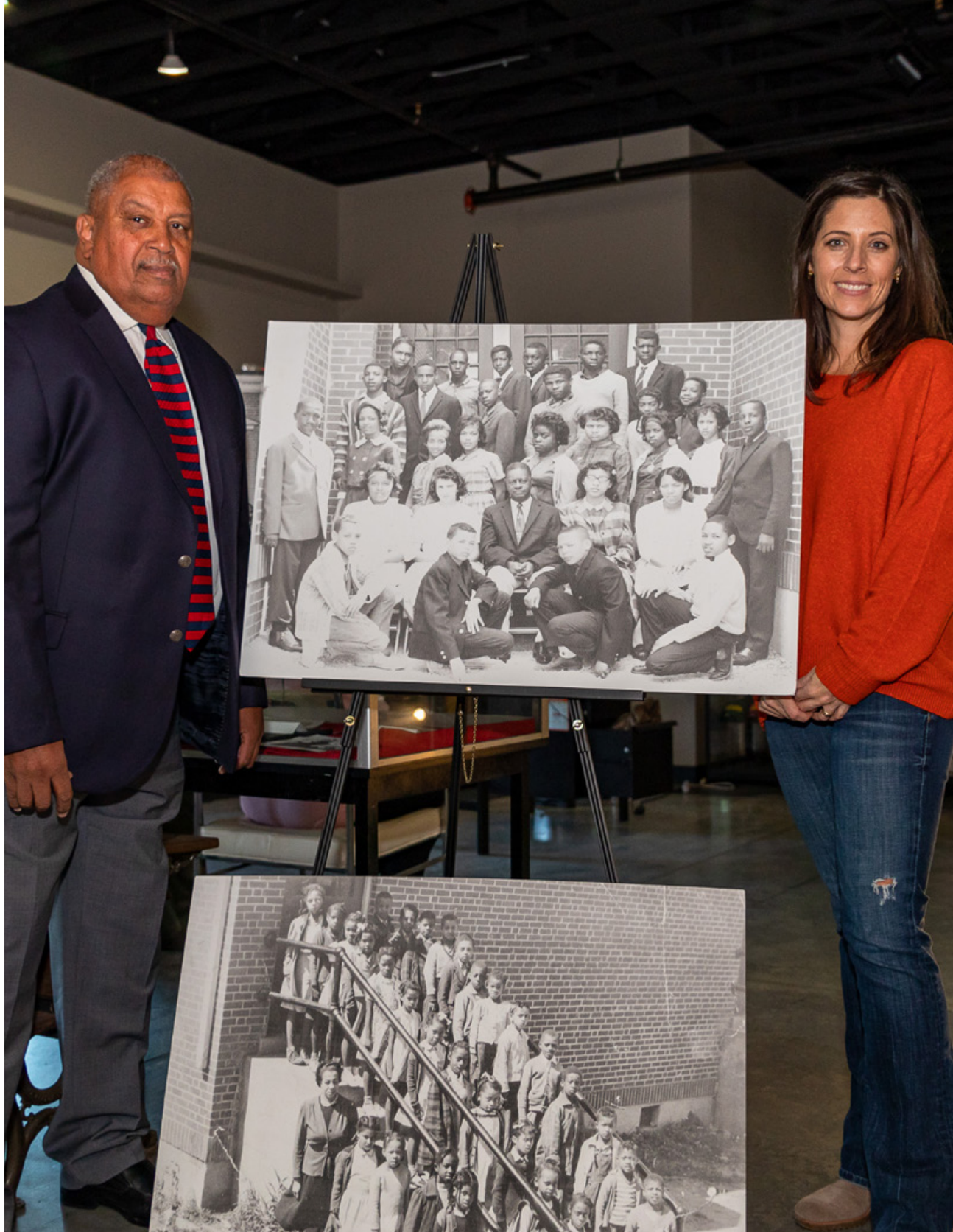
Calfee Training School:

The Legacy Lives On

BY BETTY JEAN WOLFE



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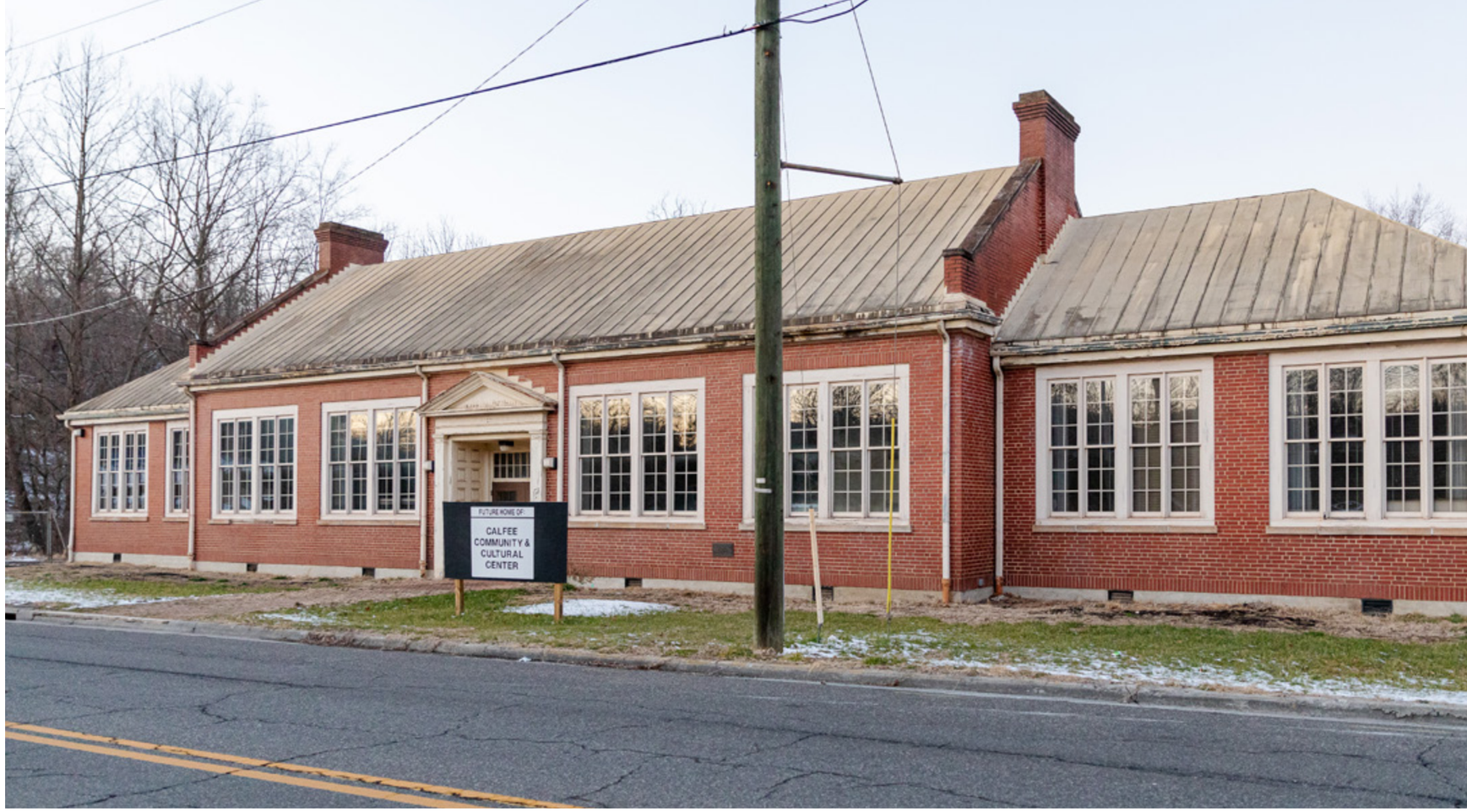

Pulaski County is a place of rugged beauty. Thick forests and rolling hills stretch across its boundaries. At the foothills of mountainous peaks are small towns. Home to eight international businesses, advanced manufacturing constitutes the heart of the county's industrial base. Located in Southwest Virginia's New River Valley, Pulaski County is a recreational paradise. Visitors flock here from near and far to hike, bike, kayak and boat. Virginia's two most visited state parks are in Pulaski: Claytor Lake and the New River Trail. Yet the history of Pulaski County is a study of contrasts.

Its land use and economy are the result of forward-thinking town administrators who, at the start of the industrial revolution, sought investment from Northern capitalists to leverage the area's rich natural resources to aid its recovery from the wreckage of the Civil War. Their embrace of mining, manufacturing and commercial enterprises triggered a sustained period of population and economic expansion that cushioned the county's transition from the agricultural age to the start of the information age. But our nation's preoccupation with class and racial hierarchy left its imprint on Pulaski's development as well. The legal strictures and social norms of racial segregation known as Jim Crow, relegated people of color to attend certain schools, work certain jobs, worship in certain churches and live in certain sections of town. The schemes and machinations ordinary people used to prop-up or dismantle how the human race was artificially divided on the basis of skin color reflect the ways Pulaski County embraced or rejected the full citizenship of African Americans. Unknown to most people, is a fascinating story about the role a group of citizens from the Town of Pulaski played in the Civil Rights struggle for Black people in Virginia's public education during the mid-20th century.

This story, rich with characters and complex plot twists, centers around Calfee Training School – an academic institute for African American students – and its faculty between the period of 1937-1966. Like most histories, it begins with people's response to social forces outside their control; but that's not where it ends. The first part outlines how key people initiated change regarding what students of color were taught and how teachers of color were treated during and after Jim Crow. The second part reveals an innovative plan currently in development to use the legacy and building of Calfee School to expand the educational, cultural and community services offered to all Pulaski County residents.

What follows are excerpts from an excellent doctoral dissertation submitted in 1995 to the faculty of Virginia Tech by N. Wayne Tripp titled, "Chauncey Depew Harmon, Senior: A Case Study in Leadership for Educational Opportunity and Equality in Pulaski, Virginia" intertwined with vignettes and insights shared by current and former Pulaski residents during interviews conducted in December as they reflected on the impact of Calfee Training School and their hopes for how the defunct building can be used to further their vision for a new kind of 21st century education.

PART I

"The past is not a place for the squeamish. You cannot hug your way through history, and it is a mistaken idea to try."
—Professor Sir David Cannadine, *Dethroning Historical Reputations (2018)*

The story begins with Chauncey Harmon, an African American educator, trained at Tuskegee Institute, who served as both a teacher and principal of Calfee Training School between 1937-39. During her interview, Marylen Harmon, a retired teacher from Salem and the only daughter of Chauncey Harmon, described her father as a man acutely sensitive to issues of social justice. Born in 1913, Chauncey demonstrated independence and forthrightness from a young age. His father was a barber; his mother provided domestic services to white families in town. Marylen shared, "Chauncey's job at age five was to take his red wagon into town to Mr. Roberts' house and retrieve their laundry for his mother to wash, then return the clean clothes to the family when she was done."

Roberts had a son named Tom who was Chauncey's age. The boys were best friends. When they turned seven, Mrs. Roberts grew concerned regarding their closeness and told her son that going forward, Chauncey would have to call him, "Mr. Tom." A few days passed. Mrs. Roberts noticed Tom appeared melancholy. The boys weren't playing together any more. She asked Chauncey's father about it; he asked his wife to find out what happened.

Chauncey told his mother: "If I have to call him 'Mr. Tom,' then he has to call me Mr. Chauncey. And if he doesn't, I'm not playing with him." Such was the cleave racial segregation wrought. At that time (generally), Black men and women in the south were not addressed by their title but by their first name, their position or an assigned name like Boy or Mamie; Negroes were expected to address white people by their titles. Mrs. Roberts' command was a request of submission from her son's negro friend. Chauncey Harmon refused to comply.

Marylen said, "Mrs. Roberts' relented…. The boys were free to play together again; no strings attached. At my father's funeral in 1993, Tom Roberts came to honor his passing." Such was the depth of Chauncey Harmon's conviction – even as a young boy – to defend what he believed in, that the incident serves as his origin story for the actions he would later take as a man.

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Formulation of the Commonwealth's Constitution in 1902 implemented several strategies designed to disenfranchise African Americans despite passage of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1868 which states:

"No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law; nor deny any person within its jurisdiction equal protection of the laws."

Section 140 of Virginia's 1902 Constitution stated: "White and colored children shall not be taught in the same school," codifying the principle of separate but equal set forth by the U.S. Supreme Court in their 1896 decision of Plessy v. Ferguson. This law and others legalized racial segregation in public and private accommodations, creating a duality in everyday life that was neither equal nor practical. For African Americans and sympathetic whites, the question then for decades was not *how* racial segregation would be managed, but *when* and *where* this system of racial hierarchy would be broken.

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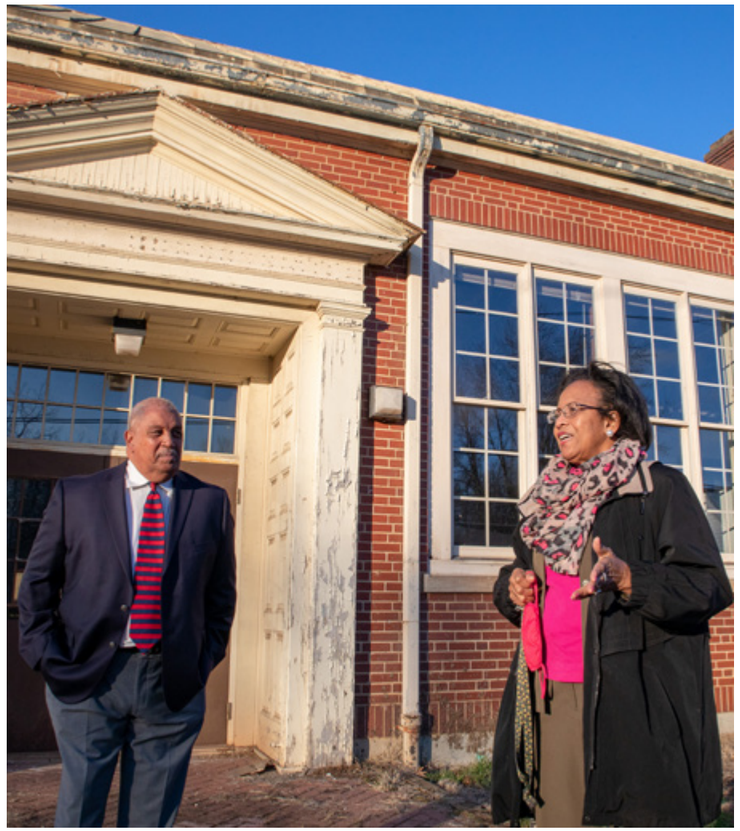
In Southwest Virginia, though public education for African American children began as early as 1868 (in Pulaski it started in 1880), most of the schools they attended were one- and two-room structures, inadequate to meet their needs. Well into the 1930s, as a rule, African American teachers were paid less than their white peers. They had fewer teaching supplies. Textbooks were usually secondhand. Student transportation was not provided. And though exceptions existed,

generally Black educators and their students were deliberately denied equal environs and rewards to teach and learn compared to their white peers. Because of this, by 1936, Pulaski's School Board was under pressure. A noted Black physician and Pulaski businessman, Dr. P.C. Corbin, had joined with other influential African Americans to demand Calfee Training School get accredited and extend its instruction through high school, so their children and others could receive the same training white students got. The superintendent acquiesced and hired three new teachers. Chauncey Harmon was one of them.

When he began the 1937-38 school year, Calfee Training School had an enrollment of 250 students. They were housed in a 43-year-old dilapidated building consisting of eight rooms. No cafeteria. No auditorium. Yet, what the faculty of eight lacked in supplies, they made up for in their determination that all their students would succeed. This shared sense of purpose bound teachers to their students for the entirety of the school's existence. So much so, that when Leon Russell, a Calfee alum and current Chairman of the NAACP National Board of Directors, recounted his time at Calfee, he could name every teacher he had from over 60 years ago.

In November 1937, Chauncey Harmon attended a conference for the Virginia State Teachers Association, an august body dating back to 1887 with a history of advancing the professional development of African American educators. While there, he heard Thurgood Marshall, then Assistant Special Counsel for the NAACP, give a speech about a lawsuit the civil rights organization initiated in Montgomery County, MD, demanding negro teachers' salaries be equal to those of white teachers. The lawsuit was part of a broader pressure strategy the NAACP was employing to expand the fight for equal pay for Blacks to other states throughout the South. By June 1938, Chauncey Harmon had secretly volunteered to participate, and became the first plaintiff for an equalization lawsuit in Virginia, originating in Pulaski County.



Marylen presented a copy of the letter Thurgood Marshall wrote to her daddy thanking him for his cooperation. The two agreed to keep the legal action under wraps until more plaintiffs joined the suit. By the start of the 1938 school year, Chauncey Harmon was promoted to principal at Calfee Training School, an outstanding achievement for a man of 25. His joy was short-lived. Two months later, a fire destroyed the school. The cause, no one ever concluded. Likely the building's hazardous condition. Dr. Corbin, Rev. T.G. Howard and other backers for progressive change saw its destruction as an opportunity to rebuild and level the educational playing field between whites and Blacks. Pulaski's School Board viewed the disaster differently. The fire provided an excuse to offload Harmon and anyone else who disrupted the status quo. By then, school officials knew Harmon and five other teachers were plaintiffs in two NAACP equalization lawsuits; one regarding teachers' salaries, the other regarding inadequate facilities. If there was no school building and Calfee students were redistributed, then high school expansion would not be needed. Harmon could be dismissed, along with his troublesome sidekick Willis Gravely, another plaintiff and Calfee teacher. A power struggle ensued. By 1939, both sides got what they wanted. Harmon and Gravely were fired. The NAACP lawsuit went forward. Calfee elementary students were placed in temporary quarters to continue their lessons until the new school building Corbin and Howard wanted was constructed, and the county's Negro high school students were bused to Christiansburg Institute for instruction.

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Fast forward 28 years to 1966. A beautiful, dearly loved, second grade teacher named Dorothy DeBerry Venable faced a choice. Pulaski County Schools had fully racially integrated. Calfee School was closed. Its teachers that summer had not received their employment contracts. Instead, they were told to report to the school board's administration building for their assignments. Venable heard that every Calfee School teacher (and its principal) had effectively been demoted; offered an assistant position to white teachers in other schools. She was furious and uncertain what to do regarding her own employment contract. During her interview, Venable explained:

"My husband was a rebel – God do I miss him! He said, 'Don't let anyone think you have to work. You've got a college degree and graduated summa cum laude; you can out teach any of them!'" She chuckled

recalling his admonition. "Three weeks before school started my husband drove me to the Administration Building, but refused to accompany me inside. I had to do it for myself. The Superintendent asked me: 'Do you feel being an assistant is a demotion?' I said, 'Yes.'" She became the only black Calfee teacher given full classroom duties that year. "I was assigned First Grade at Jefferson School." Venable said.

In response to her story, Guy Smith, the son of Calfee School alumni and the current Director of Social Services in Pulaski, added: "Ms. Venable continued teaching at Jefferson School another 32 years before retiring. She was my teacher, one of only three African American educators I had while growing up before attending Virginia Tech. What I learned from them and my parents, was the importance of courage and being a trailblazer; life lessons all children should learn, regardless of race." Smith concluded: "Calfee School had a radiating effect in Pulaski. What we want now is to honor the past while preparing for the future."

PART II

"Education . . . is a preparation for the competition of life."
— Charles Houston, Dean (1929-35), Howard University School of Law

Jill Williams, a young, petite Pulaski native, is the Executive Director of Calfee Community & Cultural Center (www.calfeeccc.org). After earning a Master's degree in Conflict Resolution from Ohio's Antioch University, a few years ago she returned to the New River Valley to live with her husband and young son. It was then she discovered the paucity of child care available to parents of preschool-aged children. According to statistics provided by the Kids Count Data Center from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Pulaski County currently has licensed childcare spots for only 8.5 percent of children under the age of six, leaving nearly 1,500 children without licensed childcare. This deficit puts Pulaski children's readiness to enter Kindergarten at risk. Williams wrote in a follow-up email: "Though some percentage of preschoolers are cared for by family members as a matter of choice, we know from parent and employer surveys there's a significant need for more quality childcare in the county."

Williams and Mickey Hickman, Chairman of Calfee Community & Cultural Center's Board of Directors, intend to tackle that gap with the board's ambitious plans for how Calfee School's old building at the intersection of Corbin-Harmon Drive (formerly Magnox) and Altoona Road will be renovated for a new era. Hickman said, "Erecting the Lucy & Chauncey Harmon Learning Center there will provide services for children age six-weeks to five-years-old (and out of school care for kids Grades K-6). Other components include a museum; a community kitchen; an events center and meeting space; a learning laboratory, where people can receive training in new technologies; and two outdoor spaces to serve as "nature's classroom" for participating youth. Their vision is being realized through an alliance of public and private interests united in a shared goal to meet the felt needs of Pulaski's community. Their ingenuity is paving the way for a prosperous 21st century.

Jill Williams shared the perfect ending to the story of Calfee Training School. It involved her son, Oscar Reis, a lively, thoughtful seven-year-old. "When Oscar was in first grade, I went to pick him up from his afterschool program. Upon my arrival, his teacher shared he had gotten in a fight that day with a fifth grader. After breaking up the fisticuffs, she took Oscar aside to ask what happened. Oscar replied: 'He wouldn't acknowledge that George Washington owned slaves!' The teacher told Oscar 'It's not your job to teach fifth graders U.S. history.' To which Oscar complained, 'If I don't tell him, who will?'" The spirit of Chauncey Harmon lives on.