

A solemn, silent walk

Second annual visit of Gonzaga students to ALX after school's discovery of ties to slavery

BY WAFIR SALIH

On Nov. 6 and 7, Washington, D.C.'s Gonzaga College High School students visited the Freedom House Museum and participated in a silent walk to honor the enslaved people who passed through the City of Alexandria.

The Freedom House Museum, located at 1315 Duke St., was originally the site of the Franklin and Armfield Slave Pen, which operated from 1828 to 1831 as one of the nation's largest slave trading centers and continued as a

slave jail until 1861.

This was the second year Gonzaga students retraced the steps of enslaved people. This annual field trip holds special significance for the school, after students uncovered their school's ties to slavery.

In 2017, six Gonzaga students, with the help of social studies teacher Ed Donnellan, discovered that the 203-year-old Jesuit school, originally known as Washington Seminary, financially benefited and relied on the labor of enslaved people, including a 13-year-old boy named Gabriel Dorsey.

According to an online exhibit by Gonzaga, Dorsey worked as an enslaved child at Washington Seminary, with

records showing that he was tipped 7 cents for tending the garden. He was later transferred to Georgetown College. Initially hopeful of buying his freedom, he was ultimately sold for \$450, detained at the Alexandria Franklin and Armfield slave pen and later transported to New Orleans where he was sold for \$700 at the age of 21.

Bill Dickinson, a local resident who closely followed the Gonzaga students' work, said he hopes the current students learn from what the previous class uncovered and leave the field trip with a more research-oriented mindset.

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Gonzaga students walking silently from Freedom House to the Potomac River.



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Benjamin Skolnik, Ph.D., an archaeologist for the city, talking with students before entering the Freedom House museum.

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“I think they’ll look at history a bit more skeptically,” Dickinson said. “This research will encourage them to go back to primary sources and expand their understanding.”

Julie Hawkins Ennis, a descendant of enslaved individuals and mother of a Gonzaga graduate from around the time of the 2017 discoveries, recalled when her son told her about the students’ findings and the possibility of a connection to their own family.

After hearing about what the Gonzaga students uncovered, Ennis began exploring her own family’s history on ancestry.com, where she noticed unexpected familial connections to people in the Deep South.

“I’m on Ancestry, and I kept connecting to people in the Deep South, which I’m like, huh?” Ennis recalled. “One or two I got, because we all know [enslaved people] were shipped all over the place. ... But it was a whole lot in Alabama and Louisiana. I’m like, what is going on here?”

She shared her findings with a cousin from Alabama, who insisted that her family had migrated from the South. Ennis was adamant that her family had not migrated. She then came across news of

Georgetown University students discovering a manifest, which served as a log detailing enslaved families transported from southern Maryland to Louisiana.

“That’s when it clicked,” Ennis said.

She connected with those cousins on ancestry.com and eventually met them; she speaks to them often about their shared history.

Ennis shared her story with students on Wednesday, hoping they walk away gaining a deeper understanding of the history and lasting trauma the domestic slave trade still inflicts to this day.

“When I come here to tell the story, I try to tell the young men – and especially those who may descend from a history where their families enslaved people – that I’m not here to blame you for it or put you down for it. I just want you to understand and have empathy about it. I just want you to understand that a lot of that trauma is still here for a lot of us Black and Indigenous people,” Ennis said.

Michele Longo, director of education and museum operations at Freedom House, guided students through a miniature recreation of the Franklin and Armfield Slave Pen, explaining each section and

describing the brutal conditions enslaved people endured there. She highlighted the impact of the students coming to the museum and going on the silent walk.

“It’s been an incredible experience being part of the pilgrimage that they take, retracing Gabriel’s steps and getting to bring them to the place where it happened,” Longo said. “It’s one thing to see documents and it’s one thing to read about something, but it’s another thing to actually stand in the place where it happened.”

The Freedom House, while currently open to the public on weekends, is undergoing a restoration process to bring it closer to its pre-Civil War appearance. The restoration is being led by Oak Grove Restoration Company on behalf of the City of Alexandria. The restoration is expected to be completed by December 2025.

Ashley Klick, a Gonzaga parent who attended the field trip, emphasized the importance of learning the difficult history and how doing so can build empathy.

“We are all here together, and there is that shared history and there’s a shared pain,” Klick said. “Maybe I don’t have the pain, but someone that I en-

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Michele Longo presenting a miniature model of the Franklin and Armfield slave pen to students.

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counter might carry that pain and this is an opportunity for us, once we all know the same information and understand what someone's true history is, to move to that healing part."

Karen Wilkins, Freedom House's museum educator, said this visit provides students with the opportunity to learn about how the domestic slave trade affected cities like Alexandria, and the different ways enslaved people persevered.

"There's been this false narrative that enslaved people were passive and they just went along with enslavement," Wilkins said. "... There were stories like Burdett Washington, who was a free Black man where he worked with people to find his son. Most of the time when people left Alexandria, they were never going to see their children again. So hearing stories about [how] this man was determined

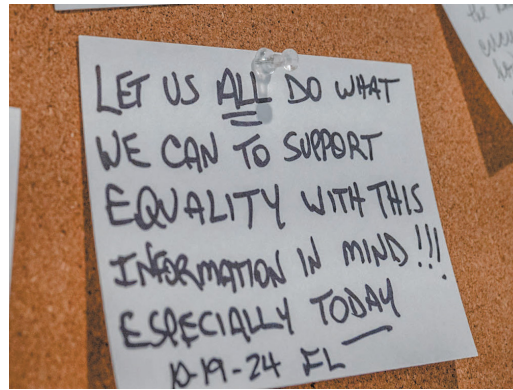
to keep his family together [is important]."

After touring the exhibits at Freedom House, students began their silent walk to the Potomac River, walking the same steps Dorsey and other enslaved people took from what used to be the location of a slave pen, to the river where boats would take enslaved people away and ship them across the United States.

Devon Leary, a Gonzaga alumnus and the school's director of community outreach and culture, gave students one final talk to prepare them before their silent walk.

"Imagine walking by shops and cafes, a library, a church. How do you feel walking by things you can't have, places you can't go?" Leary said. "How do you feel going into a future that is closed before it begins? What are you thinking? You are the name on your card. How do you feel when you see the ship?"

-wsalih@alextimes.com



PHOTOS/ARWEN CLEMANS

Gonzaga High School students exploring the museum exhibits and learning from the accompanying guides.