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Lawmakers start Prince Edward 'pilgrimage'

Officials have come to study the area's strife-torn racial past and progress toward reconciliation

BY KATHRYN ORTH

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HAMPDEN-SYDNEY -- Rep. Tom Allen spent two hours yesterday getting a history lesson on race relations, the Moton school walk-out and the five-year school closings in Prince Edward County. Then the Maine Democrat raised his hand and went right to the heart of the matter.

"Why was resistance to desegregation so strong here?" he asked.

The answer to his question wasn't simple. The short answer, author R.C. Smith said, was that Southside Virginia was the home of the Defenders of State Sovereignty, a group against desegregation, and voters loyal to Sen. Harry F. Byrd Sr., who championed Massive Resistance.

A more complete answer about how the county is dealing with the legacy of its fight to keep its schools from integrating and its path toward racial reconciliation, is what participants in the Faith and Politics Institute pilgrimage hope to take away with them.

The pilgrimage, which opened yesterday afternoon, will continue through tomorrow.

Speaking to the participants will be a number of people involved in the school closings and the reconciliation efforts. Among them will be John Stokes and John Watson, who were involved in the 1951 student strike at the R.R. Moton High School that ultimately led to the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision nullifying the doctrine of separate but equal.

Also speaking will be students affected by the school closings of 1959 to 1964, and residents, including Farmville Herald editor Ken Woodley. Woodley has been involved in developing the Brown v. Board scholarships for people whose schooling was interrupted.

Rep. Allen has gone with the Faith and Politics Institute on trips before, including a pilgrimage to Selma, Montgomery and Birmingham, Ala.

"In Congress we need reconciliation. We need to see how people of different backgrounds work together," he said.

Virginia Sen. George Allen is one of the hosts of the Prince Edward County pilgrimage along with Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga.

Allen arrived late after getting delayed by an accident that tied up traffic in Northern Virginia and by road repairs closer to Farmville. He arrived about 3 p.m., in time to take pages of notes on local history.

It is Allen's third conference with the institute, he said. "Every time I'm with them, I learn. I get inspiration from the people who fought through the hatred. I absolutely want to dedicate myself to making sure people have opportunity."

Allen said he was particularly drawn to the e-mail message read by documentary filmmaker Brian Grogan, who is working on a film about the school closings. In the e-mail, Prince Edward County schools graduate Adrian Lee, now an Ohio firefighter, told Grogan how a friend, who was white, played football for the local private school in the 1970s, while Lee played for the public school. He lamented that they could not play together.

"He said they could have had really good football teams here, if they had let everyone play. . . . You don't care about someone's race, you care if they can help your team win," Allen said.

Sen. Allen, Gov. Timothy M. Kaine and Peter Storey of Duke Divinity School will speak at tonight's dinner.

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[Go Back](#)