

Local News

'Bells for Peace' project advances

By Don Dale

Dianne Watkins' job is half done. As a result of research efforts she spearheaded, records at both Stanford University in California and Virginia Union University in Richmond have been brought up to date to reflect the fact that VUU has the Belgian Pavilion from the 1939 New York World's Fair but Stanford has the 35 bells from the pavilion's carillon.

"We will do our part to inform ... researchers about the connection between the Hoover Tower Carillon [at Stanford] and the Belgian Friendship Building at VUU," an archivist at Stanford wrote recently



Ms. Watkins

Fair closed.

The Bells for Peace inaugural fundraising event will be held at St. Paul's Baptist Church on Creighton Road Sunday, April 23, at 5 p.m. Admission will be by a \$50 minimum donation. New York musical director Ray Chew and Las Vegas entertainer Paul Balfour will headline the event, with performances also scheduled by a number of local and regional musical groups including the VUU Chamber Choir, the Suffolk Ballet and a bell choir from Richmond's Miles Jones Elementary School.

Ms. Watkins was raised on the VUU campus by her aunt and uncle, Dr. and Mrs. John Marcus Ellison Sr. Dr. Ellison was the first African-American president of the school. It was he who raised the \$500,000 it took to dismantle the Belgian tower from the World's Fair site and erect it on the VUU campus.

The Bells for Peace project was conceived to honor Dr. Ellison's memory, Ms. Watkins told the Free Press.

The 160-foot-tall Belgian tower was designed by famed Belgian architect Henri van de Velde and is listed as a U.S. National Treasure and a Virginia Historical Site. After the pavilion was reconstructed here it was named for Robert L. Vann, a VUU alumnus and founder in 1907 of the Pittsburgh Courier, once the country's most widely circulated black newspaper.

It housed the VUU library until 1997, and has since been renovated into a state-of-the-art theatre.

Additional information on the Bells for Peace project is available at www.bellsforpeace.org.

Tower, named to honor U.S. President Herbert Hoover.

And Stanford officials didn't know the tower itself was intact in Richmond. They thought it had been destroyed after the World's



Sandra Sellers/Richmond Free Press

The striking Belgian Building at Virginia Union University, for which a campaign is under way to install replacement bells.

Cityscape

Slices of life and scenes in Richmond

in a letter to Ms. Watkins.

And Dr. Elena Danielson, who has written about the Stanford bells, wrote to say the university hopes to be able to raise awareness about the Richmond-Stanford connection in future publications about the carillon.

Now comes the hard part of the job Ms. Watkins has taken on: Raising funds to have replacement bells cast for the Belgian tower at VUU.

Ms. Watkins, a 1965 VUU graduate, has established a non-profit organization, Bells for Peace to do so.

Most Richmonders are familiar with the striking slate-gray tower that is the centerpiece of Virginia Union's North Side campus. They know, too, that the tower was constructed for Belgium's pre-fabricated pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair and then reconstructed on the VUU campus in 1941.

Had it not been for the outbreak of World War II in Europe, the tower would have been dismantled and sent back to Belgium.

What VUU didn't know before Ms. Watkins' research efforts is that the tower's original bells were shipped to Stanford University in California and installed in the campus's Hoover