

VANN MEMORIAL TOWER TO GET A VOICE

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Written by Rebecca Nuttall - Courier Staff Writer Friday, 22 April 2011 09:00

For more than 60 years, students at Virginia Union University and residents in the surrounding city of Richmond have been unable to hear the sounds of bells ringing from the famed Robert L. Vann Memorial Tower. But soon, thanks to the work of the Bells for Peace campaign, a non-profit charity working to restore the tower, and the Belgium Friendship building it belongs to, bells will ring out over the college campus for the first time since the tower was constructed.



ROBERT L VANN MEMORIAL TOWER—The 166 foot bell tower has been silent since it was first constructed on Virginia Union University's campus more than 60 years ago.

“Since 2004 we have been working to build support for restoration of the Belgium Friendship Building which has decayed quite a bit,” said Dianne Watkins, president of Bells for Peace Inc. “Our mission is to make sure Virginia Union’s tower has a voice. We have an artistic treasure on the campus that needs to be restored.”

To date Bells for Peace has been able to raise approximately \$100,000 for restoration of the memorial tower and installment of a new set of brass bells, but they still have a long way to go. In the meantime, they have enough money to install an electric carillon to give the tower a voice.

“The most recent thing we did was the university was able to receive a \$300,000 donation to restore the tower so it can have a carillon. They will begin restoration this summer,” said Watkins. “We donated \$20,000 so that the electric carillon will be installed first and that it will begin ringing by Christmas. We’re still working diligently to find the funding for the brass bells.”

Though the bells once housed in the Belgium Friendship Building never actually made it to VUU, Watkins’ interest in their history was piqued when she began researching her uncle John Ellison, who served as president of VUU from 1941 to 1946. During his tenure VUU was granted with the \$700,000 Belgian Pavilion from the New York World’s Fair, which is known today as the Belgium Friendship Building.

“In Richmond, once the capital of the confederacy, where African-Americans have had to withstand the burden of racial injustice, the Belgium government gave Virginia Union a building at a time when Jim Crow laws were enforced,” Watkins said. “There were people who didn’t want to see the Belgium government give the building to an African-American school, but they did it as an act of brotherhood and friendship. Now they’re working to help us find the funding for the restoration of the tower.”

In 1941 when the Belgium Friendship Building was transported to Richmond and reconstructed on the VUU campus, the wife of Robert L. Vann, founder and editor of the Pittsburgh Courier and a VUU alumnus, granted the school with the funds necessary for the reconstruction of the tower to be named for her husband.

Through her research, Watkins discovered that the carillon of 35 bells once housed in the tower were given as a gift to president Herbert Hoover who then donated them to Stanford University in California. Together with other members of her organization, she is working to see bells restored to the tower.

Although Bells for Peace's primary mission is the restoration of the memorial tower, they are also committed to carrying on an education of the community on the legacy of the Belgian Friendship Building, the memorial tower and the people who fought to see it constructed.

"The 161 foot Vann Memorial Tower can be seen across the city," Watkins said. "The carillon will ring out for education as a key to a peaceful world. The bells will ring out for access to education, healthcare and employment."

(Tax-deductible contributions can be sent to Bells for Peace, Inc, P.O. Box 27371, Richmond 23261-7371. For more information please visit www.bellsforpeace.org.)