

AT VUU

Will There Be Bells In the Tower? Yes!

By DIANNE WATKINS

“Will there really be bells in the tower? Are you sure?” These were recent questions passionately asked of me by a fellow Virginia Union University alumna. Her questions have come as a result of the “Bells for Peace” campaign that raises public awareness about an important historical gift from Belgium to Virginia Union University in 1941.

Bells for Peace, Inc., a non-profit charity, was founded in March, 2004, when information emerged linking the Belgian Friendship Building of Virginia Union University to Stanford University. The building, the pavilion of the 1939-40 New York World’s Fair, was awarded to Virginia Union University because of its mission and location. Belgium was under siege by Germany, hence the building could not be returned to Belgium. The building is a designated United States Treasure and Virginia Historical Landmark. Virginia Union University is an African-American institution that opened in 1865 at the end of the Civil War, one of the first in the nation. Belgium’s gift was a powerful gesture of international goodwill.

BELGIUM PRESENTED the carillon of 35 tower bells from its pavilion to former President Herbert Hoover for his new library at Stanford University before the building left New York. The gift to Hoover was in appreciation of his humanitarian relief efforts to the Belgian people after WWI. Neither university had a record of their common history until March, 2004, when the connection came to light. It is only in recent months that World’s Fair archivists learned of the existence of the Belgian Friendship Building at Virginia Union University.

“Bells for Peace” was founded on the joint legacy of John Malcus Ellison Sr. (1889-1979), the first African-American president of Virginia Union University, and his wife, Elizabeth Balfour Ellison (1911-1994). Their determination during a challenging social and economic

era enabled countless students to make profound contributions to their communities worldwide. It was through the efforts of Ellison, as well as some very compassionate donors, that a half-million dollars was given to transport and reconstruct the Belgian Building in Richmond. His supporters had keen understandings of the university’s educational mission and the community need to foster harmony. They provided the moral and financial support that helped the university to flourish and come a highly respected and admired institution.

“Bells for Peace” envisions a new addition in the Belgian Friendship Building’s 165-foot Robert L. Vann Memorial Tower beginning with a chime of bells and extending to full restoration of the building. It highlights this unique structure in Richmond and the history of its designer, Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957), one of the greatest architects of his time. The Belgian Friendship Building is his only masterpiece in America; its majestic tower can be seen from many areas of the Richmond community.

Accomplishing this feat is of course a very ambitious undertaking, but will ultimately provide renewed hope to those who understand the significance of this international landmark. A symbolic tower belfry that remains empty and silent in a community that values its treasures to the utmost gives us pause. A powerful message is sent to the world as it focuses on Richmond history, and observes its progress; the well-being of its population and institutions. It is a message that speaks of brotherhood and friendship that assures that the historic Virginia Union University — with its humble beginnings out of Lumpkin’s Jail, a former slave-holding pen — receives the most attention.

CURRENTLY, support for “Bells for Peace” is coming from various groups. The Embassy of Belgium included an announcement in its spring newsletter to 4,000 readers worldwide and sent representatives to visit the building. The Guild of Carillonneurs in North America rang their bells on Sunday, April 23, 2006, to commemorate the inaugural event of the Bells for Peace program. Member carillonneurs are disseminating information internationally. An impressive team of global directors, advisers, and alumni are committed to the organization’s success. The entire greater Richmond metropolitan area can share in this initiative, one that ignites a spirit of unity and pride for the entire community, state, nation, and world.

“Will there really be bells in the tower? Are you sure?” My resounding answer is “Yes!”

■ Dianne Watkins, a 1965 graduate of Virginia Union University, is president and founder of Bells for Peace, Inc. She was reared by her aunt and uncle, Mrs. John M. Ellison Sr. of VUU campus.



Dianne Watkins stands in front of VUU’s Robert L. Vann Memorial Tower.