

HONOR THE PAST, SHAPE THE FUTURE

Posted: September 2, 2013

By **DAVID H. EHRENPREIS**

We care deeply about our past. We fondly remember our families, our friends, and our neighbors. We remember celebrations and gatherings, sights and smells.

And perhaps even more clearly, we remember our place: the streets on which we grew up, the schools we attended, our favorite stores and restaurants.

Almost nothing is as painful as the feeling that others are not honoring our past, or even worse that they are attempting to re-write our history.

After the recent controversy surrounding the renaming of Cantrell Avenue to Martin Luther King Jr. Way, it's easy to see why many communities have avoided tackling an issue that raises such strong passions so swiftly.

But thinking carefully about the past is a courageous and necessary act. It can help our community to heal and can even make us better people. Harrisonburg will be a far richer place for having embraced this process.

For both supporters and opponents of this issue, the key question has been how best to honor the past. Many view the re-naming as a symbolic act that will help redress a legacy of racial injustice, demonstrating that we acknowledge and celebrate all members of our increasingly diverse community.

The new name will commemorate the life and work of an American hero and inspire future generations to work for racial and social justice.

But the citizens who want to preserve the name Cantrell also have compelling reasons to speak out.

They feel so strongly about this issue because throughout their lifetimes, they have watched the places they care about most, their homes, churches, theaters and businesses, torn down and turned into parking lots.

In this context, removing an established street name serves as only the latest instance of what feels like the unrelenting obliteration of their past.

The challenge now is to look carefully at our history and acknowledge the importance of both understandings of the past. Only then can we create a shared vision for the future.

Perhaps no event in recent history did more damage both physically and psychically to our community than the forgotten "urban renewal" initiative known as Project R4.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, city officials like those in communities across the country, sought federal redevelopment funds for new large-scale commercial and residential projects.

Locally, this resulted in the destruction of the heart of the black community known as Newtown.

This sizeable area, which covered the blocks from where Kline's now stands all the way to the Little Grill, was the home to a thriving, integrated community (60 percent black, 40 percent white).

The consequences of this massive "slum clearance" for Harrisonburg were enormously detrimental. Not only were homes and businesses razed, but so were institutions like the First Baptist Church and the Jewish Synagogue.

Black residents were moved to one housing project and whites to another, worsening segregation. Project R4 divided our community and destroyed large sections of our city. Understanding this history can help us to respect the lived experience of all our citizens.

As important as the outcome of the recent City Council meeting concerning the renaming of Cantrell was the process itself.

Despite differing views on an extremely complex issue, our declarations were nearly all measured and respectful. Our assembly was also extraordinarily diverse, made up of a wide range of ages and ethnic groups. Business owners, students, lawyers, educators — all felt moved to speak about our common future. It made me extraordinarily proud to be a citizen of Harrisonburg.

This thoughtful conversation offers us an extraordinary opportunity to continue the public dialogue about our values — values that are as evident in the way we treat each other as the way we care for our spaces and buildings.

The challenge now is to honor our past as we shape our future. To advance this dialogue, a range of civic and educational groups are sponsoring “Remembering Place,” a series of three panel discussions, to take part this fall.

All conversations take place between 6:30 and 8:30 pm. We look forward to seeing you there:

- Remembering Newtown, Lucy Simms Center, Thursday, Sept. 19.
- Remembering Downtown, Memorial Hall Forum, Wednesday, Oct. 9.
- Creating Our Town, Memorial Hall Forum, Wednesday, Oct. 30.

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