

Repurposed Lincoln School leaves lasting Impression on visitors

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EDWARDSVILLE - More than 1,400 visitors have toured the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities (MJCH) since it opened on Dec. 1, 2015, and public reaction has been largely positive.

Originally the historic Lincoln School in Downtown Edwardsville, the building is bringing fond memories back to the Edwardsville community and is generating excitement about the center's future.

“I’ve had so much fun listening to all of the stories and experiences shared by former students, teachers and citizens associated with the Lincoln School,” said Ed Hightower, executive director of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation (MJCHF) and former superintendent of the Edwardsville School District. “Visitor comments have ranged from ‘astonishing’ to ‘amazing’ regarding the center's design and interior. Others have noted their appreciation for saving a piece of Edwardsville history.”

Before Mannie Jackson and Lewis and Clark Community College joined forces to repurpose the building, its rich past traced back to the early 1800s, when the property was Edwardsville's first town center. It later became the site of the Donation Courthouse, and then a segregated school, which eventually became known as Lincoln School. The site was also the Edwardsville School District's K-12 school building until it closed in 1949.

In just more than a year, the historic building was transformed into the MJCH, a humanities center and future worldwide Center of Excellence for resolving conflict through the humanities by using respect, dignity, understanding and forgiveness as its core values.

“Without the vision and commitment of Mannie Jackson, the city of Edwardsville would have lost this historic building,” said Cyndi Reinhardt, member of the Edwardsville Historic Preservation Commission and board member of the Madison County Historical Society. “There is rich heritage here, and it is important to save it.” Harry Shaw, former Lincoln School student and current professor at the University of Florida, said the MJCH is a fitting tribute to the dedication and commitment of the Lincoln School’s teachers and students who worked to remove barriers that hinder individuals from realizing their aspirations and full potential.

“The attention and interest spawned by the grand opening highlights the vision of the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities Foundation, as it wisely looks beyond the history of the Lincoln School itself to provide the needed platform for conversation for a growing sensitivity of issues facing this country,” Shaw said.

Several former Lincoln School students and retired Edwardsville School District 7 teachers, including Chris Durkee and Lucia Weber, also visited their old school and relived childhood memories.

“We hold the memories of Lincoln School dear to our hearts,” Durkee said.



“Going back to Lincoln School after five decades was an experience both Chris and I will never forget,” Weber added. “Lincoln School in the 50s was our home away from home. It's amazing that after 50 years we could still find our kindergarten room; the gym – we even discovered the hidden bleachers and the ghost of Elmer Jenne's principal's office.”

Edwardsville School Board Member Jill Bertels, another Lincoln School alumna, said she looks at education differently because of her positive experiences at the school.

“As I drive by the Mannie Jackson Center for the Humanities, I recall my childhood days of climbing on the jungle gym, jumping rope and playing four square and hopscotch with my classmates during recess,” she said. “On my tour of the renovated Lincoln School, I began reminiscing on all of the fun days we had. The stairs and brick archways that led to the gym are still intact. I thought about physical education classes, eating lunch, spring musicals and participating in the PTO’s fall festivals. I recalled the library, which was in an alcove in the main hall, and where each teacher taught, as well as Principal Jenne’s office. Those were great memories for my friends and for me, as we had an opportunity to reminisce and share stories during the opening of the MJCH.

“We will always treasure these memories, as the school was a starting point for many students who have gone on to accomplish so much in their professions, such as Mannie Jackson. It is so gratifying that Mannie is providing a new vision for the Lincoln School and our community.”

Herman Shaw, president of the Lincoln School Alumni Foundation, was instrumental in persuading Jackson to purchase the old Lincoln School and preserve it, and he sees the restoration of his old school as a dream come true.

“Mannie is rare; he is a dreamer. It takes someone like him, a person with a vision and the ability to move people into action, to make something beautiful out of troubled wreckage,” Shaw said. “Seeing my old school preserved gives me a feeling of pride, satisfaction and gratification. The Edwardsville community can’t repay Mannie for his act of kindness in purchasing the dilapidated Lincoln School, but we can say thank you Mannie, and I want to express my personal thanks as well.”

Barbara Stamer, a former Lincoln School student and longtime Edwardsville Alderman, believes this project has and continues to be important to the Edwardsville community, but also sees it as having been a personal journey for her. She was one of more than 1,000 visitors who attended the open house receptions for the MJCH grand opening celebration in December.



“I attended the Lincoln School for seven years – kindergarten through sixth grade – in the early 60s, and when I walked inside the renovated interior, there were reminders of those years,” Stamer said. “There are still steps that lead to the main level where the classrooms had been, and steps on either side that take you to the lower levels where the kindergarten room, bathrooms and gym were.

“It was fun to spend time with former classmates and to speak with other people who had went to school there before and after me – all of us laughing and reminiscing about old times. The repurposed Lincoln School building is nothing short of amazing. I see the MJCH as a building of hopes, dreams and endless possibilities.”

The MJCHF and Lewis and Clark Community College are currently busy planning programs and opportunities centered on the center’s four pillars – Respect, Dignity, Understanding and Forgiveness.

Individuals are encouraged to visit www.mjchf.org for additional pictures and video from the open house.

To find out more about the center or the MJCHF, contact Hightower at (618) 655-2881 or email drehightower@mjchf.org. [Find us on Facebook](#), [Flickr](#), [Instagram @mjchfoundation](#), [Twitter @mjch_foundation](#) and the Riverbender.com.