

Southern Maryland Stories

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Dr. James Forrest

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Given Dr. James Forrest's many years of involvement in local education, it is fitting that St. Mary's County's career and technology center is named for the 93-year-old Leonardtown resident.

"You really need education to make your way in life. You can be lost without it," Forrest said. "The difference between a farmer who can read and write and a farmer who can't is that after plowing, the first farmer can pick up the newspaper and understand the world better."

It was through his children that Forrest's involvement with schools and education became a passion in his life. As a member of the United Parents/Trustees Association, in 1937 he helped establish Banneker High School, the first secondary school for African-Americans in St. Mary's County. Before Banneker opened, the only options for secondary education for the county's African-Americans depended on their parents' ability to send them to Calvert County or to board them with friends or relatives in Baltimore or Washington D.C.



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Later, Forrest played a key role on the committee that helped desegregate St. Mary's County public schools in the 1960s. That led to his appointment by Maryland's governor to the county board of education. Forrest served 10 years on the school board, 5 of them as president, and several new schools were constructed under his leadership. One of those schools was the tech center that now bears his name.

When Forrest was growing up in Ridge, most area residents earned their living as farmers or watermen, or sometimes both depending on the season. With roads not yet paved, farmers delivered their produce by oxcart to processing plants along the shore, where steamboats picked it up for shipment.

Forrest worked 41 years for C&P Telephone, working up to the positions of line crew foreman and construction foreman. Before that, he held a number of jobs—blending explosive power at Indian Head Naval Ordnance Station, waiting tables at the Point Lookout Hotel and at St. Mary's Female Seminary (now St. Mary's College), and picking strawberries in Crisfield.

He lived in Detroit, Michigan, for a brief time in 1925, and remembers seeing the Ford automotive assembly line for the first time. "The plant had long windows along the street, and you could see the models roll off the line ready to go," Forrest said.

Another thing Forrest noticed in Detroit was that the public schools had no racial segregation. "Segregation was accepted here (in Maryland) for many years because it was a custom. Certain things were accepted that aren't accepted now. People decided it was foolishness to pay to operate two school systems, two sets of books and so forth," Forrest said.

Almost 40 years later, Forrest was one of the 250,000 who participated in the March on Washington in 1963, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. "It was a tough struggle to end segregation, and it may be hard for some people to understand the difficulties we went through to make that condition a reality. Sometimes I still ask why prejudice is so prevalent. I think, 'I haven't done one thing to you but you still hate me because I'm different,' " Forrest said. "All of us who were part of that struggle have come through it pretty lucky. We have our scars but they heal quickly. I believe we're able to understand change better because we're able to deal with certain situations, and better understand the other fellow's point of view."

Forrest has helped his community in many other fields besides education. He and his family hosted Camp Mohawk on their property in Leonardtown. That camp, operated by Al Barthelme and Jimmy McCleaf, was the beginning of the county government's department of recreation and parks.

Before the desegregation of the St. Mary's County Fair, Forrest served as president of the Farmers and Homemakers fair held by the county's African-Americans. Later he served on the St. Mary's County Fair Board as well as the boards for St. Mary's Hospital and the Cedar Lane Apartments senior housing community. He was an adviser for the 4-H Clubs and New Farmers of America. He is a member of the National Association of Colored People, Minority Business Alliance, and the Knights of St. Jerome. For his community service, he was awarded an honorary doctoral degree from St. Mary's College.

"If you want to become part of something, you need to participate. Don't stand on the sidelines and hope it will work," Forrest said.

Forrest and his wife, the former Harriett Swales, have been married for 68 years. They have five children: James II, an environmental specialist with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; George, St. Mary's County Administrator; Lewis, an author and educator; Barbara, a retired educator; and Francis, a business owner. They have nine grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren. The family has a strong record of community service, and Forrest credits them for the honors he has received from the school system and the college.

"Words don't come easily for me to describe how I feel. I felt like, what did we do to deserve such an honor? I don't remember doing more than anyone else. I tried to be fair with whatever I undertook to do," Forrest said. "I couldn't have done it without my family. If someone asked me what my greatest achievement is, without thinking about the answer, I would say it's my family."