

Hillside alumni reunite through song

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College towns have become integral parts of the American landscape, making it difficult to find a city where a high school is still a central part of the community. This is not the case in Durham, where Hillside High School has remained a mainstay of the city.

Hillside is so vital to its community that alumni have taken various measures to ensure it stays fresh in the minds of Durham residents. One of those measures is the creation of the Hillside High School Alumni Choir, founded in December 2014 by alumna Mary Scott.

Scott said one of the best parts about the choir is that it reminds people of the importance of Hillside to the community.

"I don't think the current students really understand the historical significance of Hillside to the black mecca in Durham," Scott said; "It was the high school."

Other choir members shared similar sentiments when it came to the importance of Hillside to Durham.

"Hillside has always been iconic to the community," said Val Hannah Murphy, an inaugural choir member.

Murphy said a lot of the significance of Hillside came from the way it prepared young African-Americans in the historic Hayti District for the business world. Hayti was the largest black community in Durham before the end of segregation.

"When you graduated from Hillside, you could almost say you went to a technical school because they taught all the trades you needed in life," Murphy said.

Minister Gwen Chambers, assistant pastor at Cox Memorial Freewill Baptist Church in Durham, also stressed the value of Hillside to Durham.

"It is one of the premier institutions in the city," Chambers said; "At one point, it was the only black high school."

The Hillside High School Alumni Choir has 53 members who meet once or twice a month to practice. Most of the members are busy musicians on their



Several members of the Hillside High School Alumni Choir gather outside of Jesus' Word Church in Durham. It is rare that all of the choir is together due to their busy schedules as musicians. (Staff photo by Travis Butler)

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—Val Hannah Murphy

own or they would meet more often, Scott said. The choir often performs at different churches and other locations throughout Durham.

Scott said the enthusiasm for the choir has been far greater than expected.

"Some people have even told me 'I can't join the train right now, but save me a seat,'" Scott said.

People join for several reasons, according to its members.

"I love it because it takes me back to when I was actually walking down the hallways at Hillside," Murphy said.

Scott formed the choir because it gave her an chance to do something she didn't take advantage of when she was in high school.

"A lot of people, including myself, wished they were in the choir in high school, so I said 'okay, you have the chance now,'" she said.

Chambers said she joined to reconnect with old friends.

"I like the fellowship and being able to see people I haven't seen in years," she said.

Carolyn Satterfield, a radio host at North Carolina Central University's 90.7 WNCU, joined the choir because of her great memories of the music—particularly the band—at Hillside.

"The Marching Hornets are just the best," Satterfield said; "They are the bomb!"

The Hillside Alumni Choir performed at the Black History Month celebration at the Antioch Baptist Church in February. The choir sings gospel music and hymns and will perform at various times throughout this year.