

HardisonInk.com

WMHS story unwraps



Julia Etheridge holds 3-month-old Ashtyn Etheridge as her husband Danny Etheridge escorts his wife and their daughter to the dedication ceremony. This baby is among the children who potentially may attend and graduate from the new school. Mr. Etheridge is among the members of the Williston City Council.

**Story, Photos and Video By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 28, 2016 @ 7:37 p.m.
All Rights Reserved**

WILLISTON – Levy County Superintendent of Schools Robert O. Hastings led a ribbon-cutting and dedication ceremony Saturday morning (Aug. 27) to unwrap the story of the 2016 Williston Middle High School.

Some writers may know a formula leading to the dénouement -- or to the point when the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are unraveled, explained or resolved.

As for Saturday's event, it really was like the unwrapping of a gift. This presentation of expressions of gratitude to the people of Levy County started with the ceremonial cutting of a few ribbons.

The event offered a chance to share some stories and thoughts as well.



Levy County Superintendent of Schools Robert O. 'Bob' Hastings stands next to a pillar with a plaque on it for the new Williston Middle High School. There are six School Board members names, including the late Robert Philpot, because he passed away during the process of bringing the school into active service. Ray Davis, the construction superintendent for this project by ACA Construction Group of Ocala, also died during the 14-month period of building the \$34.4 million school.

HardisonInk.com



Seen moments before the ribbon-cutting began are (from left) School Board Member Rick Turner, School Board Member Brad Etheridge, Superintendent of Schools Robert O. Hastings, School Board Member Paige Brookins, School Board Member Cameron Asbell and School Board Member Chris Cowart.



of the ceremonies. Shinn is among the cadets in the Army Jr. Reserve Officer Training Corps at WMHS.

Just as more than one ribbon met with the blade of functional scissors, so too many strands that were metaphorically banded together became untied to lead to the moments in the WMHS Cafetorium, where people learned of past lives, past actions and the bright hope for a beautiful future in the easternmost municipality of Levy County.

This opening ceremony heralds the start of the life of a structure that will be part of the lives of some number of individuals and families over time.

The campus is relatively large with separate wings for Vo-Tech, the high school classrooms, the middle school classrooms and an area for administration. The gymnasium is separate.

Robert Shinn, a junior at Williston Middle High School, single-handedly raises the American flag outside the school on Saturday morning (Aug. 27) before the start

Most of the areas were open for touring, although some places were marked with “Do Not Enter” signs, and the gymnasium and Vo-Tech wings were not accessible from outside, although entrance could be gained through interior doors.

One taxpayer mentioned that he noticed that even the inner doors were well built for security. The functional labs for agriculture, welding, health science studies, home economics and other

HardisonInk.com

aspects of academia and vocational education appeared to be well-equipped.

The Army Jr. Reserve Officer Training Corps has an indoor air-rifle shooting range that is 30-feet wide by 90-feet long. Targets are placed 33 feet away from the shooters.

Each of the morning's speakers shared perspectives they had gained from the time when the need for replacing the old high school and merging it with the middle school became too much to put off any more, to the first day of school this school year – when ACA Construction Group proved it meant what it said, and completed its construction mission on time and within budget.

Before that point in this story, however, one of the lobbyists leading to the success of this venture shared some thoughts with HardisonInk.com before the ribbon was cut.



ROBERT L. BEDFORD (seen above)

Robert L. “Bob” Bedford currently serves as chief executive officer of Emergent Design and Development Inc., which is a private corporation that provides consultative services in the areas of market development and governmental relations – exclusively focused on the field of education.

He helped lobby for the construction of the new WMHS. He is the consultant for this project, Hastings said.

Before retiring from the Florida Department of Education in August of 1998, Bedford served as Deputy Commissioner for Educational Programs, a position he had held since 1994.

His primary responsibility with the Florida Department of Education included the direction of educational programs within the Department and the coordination of department services to local school districts.

He has a comprehensive background of educational experiences covering 35 years of service to schools, students, teachers and citizens of Florida.

Prior to his service within the Department of Education, Mr. Bedford served as Superintendent of Schools in Charlotte County, Florida since 1981. And his credential include an extensive background in other areas of public service as well.

HardisonInk.com

Also, he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Education from the University of Florida, and a Master's Degree in Administration and Supervision from Florida Atlantic University.

With that background, Bedford continues to help Florida schools. Bedford spoke for a few moments with *HardisonInk.com* about Robert Hastings.

“Bob Hastings,” Bedford said, “has done more for less (money spent) than I have ever seen. Bob Hastings as superintendent is responsible for this school coming to be.”



DR. PATRICK WNEK (in the foreground)

Hastings said Dr. Patrick Wnek was with the Levy County School System and was of significance in helping bring about WMHS.

Now Wnek has gone to the North East Florida Educational Consortium as its executive director.

The Consortium is a regional, non-profit, educational service agency established to provide cooperative services to member districts.

The mission of the North East Florida Educational Consortium is to help member districts cooperatively meet their educational goals and objectives by providing programs and services that individual districts would not be able to provide as effectively or as economically when acting alone.

ROBERT O. HASTINGS

Levy County Superintendent of Schools Hastings welcomed everyone to the dedication ceremony, which is the Levy County School District's way of saying "Thank you" to all who helped.

He mentioned that there have been about 1,800 to 2,000 people who have already toured the school because there had been two previous open house events for parents and others to see it. Hastings tagged the guests on Saturday as being "the topping off of a wonderful, wonderful school event."

This project took six years to complete, he said, from the moment when people began visiting leaders in Tallahassee.

Hastings was quick to mention ACA Construction Group's part in the building of the facilities.

One of the first people he mentioned to recognize was the late Levy County School Board member Robert E. Philpot.

HardisonInk.com

Philpot is the man who “got the ball rolling.” Hastings said he is grateful for the contributions Philpot made to help Levy County students, and for the life he lived.

“We are so appreciative of Robert Philpot and his family,” Hastings said and the crowd applauded.

The superintendent mentioned that two family members came from Chattanooga, Tenn., to be at this ceremony.

During the program, Superintendent Hastings said he appreciates the work of Architect Paul Stressing Associates, and state Rep. Will Kendrick of Carabelle, whom Hastings called “a friend of Levy County.”



This garden area is the former gravesite.

THE GRAVESITE

Hastings mentioned that when the School Board bought the property to build the new school on it, he had heard rumors that there may be a gravesite on it.

He walked across the property, looking for it and he did not find it – until workers started clearing the property of plants to place the structures.

There was a process, he said, where the Limbaugh family was given the choice on what to do about the five graves there – with their family members.

Hastings said if the family wanted to leave it in place, then there would be a fence constructed around it and it would be left right where it existed. The law requires the closest of kin to make the decision, he said, not the School Board.

Of the 70 or so Limbaugh family members, there were three or so who objected to moving the graves of their relatives, Hastings said.

“But all of the close relatives,” Hastings said, “everyone wanted it moved to Orange Hill Cemetery.”

Hastings said the family declined the offer from the School Board to purchase plots for the Limbaughs. He said the headstones which were carved in the 1800s were placed over the new gravesites, where the family already had four plots prepared at Orange Hill Cemetery.

Hastings said the Williston Alumni Association decorated the area on the school grounds,

HardisonInk.com

which is designated in memory of the people who had been buried there.



The memorial garden is in the foreground with the outside of the Vocational Suite in the background.



After the dedication ceremony (from left) Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22), Levy County School Board Member Paige Brookins and Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat are seen conversing, and grant a request for a photo opportunity.

HardisonInk.com

CHARLIE STONE

State Rep. Charlie Stone (R-Ocala, Dist. 22), Hastings said, was a key player in helping assure there was state funding for the \$34.4 million school to be built.

Rep. Stone thanked the people for attending the dedication ceremony and for allowing him to represent them in the Florida House of Representatives.

The process resulting in WMHS coming to fruition started before Stone was elected to the House of Representatives, Stone said.

“But it didn’t seem to move,” he said. “One year it looked fairly good. The next year it didn’t move at all.”

Rep. Stone found the House members who look at school funding. He made sure they understood the real need for this project to begin.

This is a great day for the people of Williston and Levy County, he said, as this school forms a foundation for the students in a state-of-the-art learning facility. It forms a foundation, too, he said for the parents, faculty, administrative and support services staffs.

Stone said every School Board member visited with him, time and time again, to assure this project would be completed. He is thankful for their relentless diligence in striving to help the children of Levy County.

ACA Construction Group, too, merited the state representative’s commendation for completing the project “... on time and on budget. You can’t say that about every project that’s built today.”

Stone went to then-Speaker of the House Will Weatherford. During his final term in the Florida Legislature (2012-2014), Weatherford served as the Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives, which made him the youngest presiding officer of any state legislative chamber in the United States at the time.

Stone could not, however, be the only person seeking this funding for his district. He found help from several people to speak to the Appropriations Committee chair and others in the House to make sure this would happen.

When Speaker Weatherford told Stone that he had been to Williston and understood the need, and that “it is time,” that is when, from that point on, Stone felt like “We are going to win this one.”

Stone worked with his counterpart in the Florida Senate then-Sen. Charlie Dean and the funding came through for the project.

Without the efforts of all of the people in the community, too, Stone said, the project would have been postponed for another year. He thanked all of the people for their work to make this school become a reality.

HardisonInk.com



WMHS AJROTC Cadet Brianna Eckblad prepares to carry the American flag as part of the Color Guard at the ceremony. AJROTC Cadet Burmeshia Pasco sang the *Star-Spangled Banner* and AJROTC Cadet Alexis Eggers carried the Florida state flag.

LINDSEY LEGLER

WMHS Principal Lindsey Legler spoke during the dedication ceremony.

Hastings said he appreciates the work she did to combine Williston Middle School and Williston High School, to create WMHS of today.

Legler is an alumnus of the old WHS, and is proud to be the principal at WMHS and a member of “the Red Devil Nation.” WMHS is the Red Devils.

She noted her appreciation to Superintendent Hastings, Assistant Superintendent of Administration Jeff Edison, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum John Lott and other

HardisonInk.com

district employees for always providing the needed help and support.

She said there were students from various school organizations to show people around the campus on Saturday.



People mingle before the program begins in the WMHS Cafetorium.

DEDEE McLEOD

Dedee McLeod, president of the Williston Alumni Association, shared a lot of information with the audience.

Prior to the new school being built, the WAA did not exist.

McLeod is a third generation WHS graduate. She is the daughter of Patsy Fugate.

With the blessing of administration, McLeod created a Facebook group named “Team New Williston Middle High School,” and it was put up on June 24, 2015, and now has more than 1,300 members.

McLeod led the efforts to show people progress at the site as the buildings were constructed.

She received approval from district administration and held a community meeting where WHS alumni from the Class of 1943 to the Class of 2012 attended. That first meeting of the group was at Williston Middle School, which is also the former home of Williston Vocational School.

“From the very first conversation held,” McLeod said, “it was evident that we wanted to be in complete support of the new, but also wanted to honor the old.”

One manner in which the group has started on that goal is through the trophy cases near the front office.

“The wood to build the cases came from the bleachers that were removed from Williston Middle Gym,” McLeod said, “which were also the original bleachers from Williston Vocational School. Eventually, we will have all the class composite pictures hanging on the walls of WHS here, reframed from the same wood.”

The outpouring of Williston pride from alumni and community members has been moving, and reaffirms for McLeod some of the reasons she chose Williston as her home.

“Thank you for never giving up on Williston’s Dream!” McLeod said in conclusion. “Today’s youth will be tomorrow’s leaders. This facility is evidence of your passion to educate all of our students in a safe environment and to graduate them ready for college and career success.”

HardisonInk.com



Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Senior Judge Joseph E. Smith shares pearls of wisdom with the crowd.

JOSEPH E. SMITH

Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Senior Judge Joseph E. Smith, who has been a senior judge since 2010, and was previously the Levy County Court Judge from 1993 to 2009, then spoke.

Both of Judge Smith's children graduated from WHS, he said.

He is a member of the WHS Class of 1960.

His mother and father were in the WHS Class of 1928.

The judge said his grandmother Dolly S. Smith was a member of the Williston (Florida) Normal School Class of 1907.

Judge Smith went through a long list of professions and trades, where WHS graduates have succeeded, and he listed several colleges and honor military academies where WHS grads continued their education as well.

The new WMHS is the most technologically advanced school north of Broward County, he said.

"So, from these halls," he said, "our grads will continue to go forth with a solid foundation to assist them in their achievements. A debt of gratitude is owed to both the present and preceding School Boards of Levy County."

Judge Smith said a "huge debt of gratitude" is owed to Superintendent Hastings.

As he went on with his message to the people, he reminded listeners that it is not a building complex, "even one as nice as this" that makes a school.

He quoted the first two lines of the WHS Alma Mater as he shared his thoughts in that regard:

"While at school we gather

"Memories fond and dear."

From the halls students walk through during their elementary years, through all of the different schools over the subsequent years, it is the memories that carry forward, he said.

Memories of teachers, coaches, friends, classmates, "... the small town band with the big sound" and so much more is what makes the school. Judge Smith asked if there are other people who are -- from their memories that they share -- much better football players than when they were on the field.

Volleyball games, basketball games, baseball championships, proms and the decorated gym...

HardisonInk.com

First puppy love, PTA carnivals, and kings and queens, mullet fish fry fundraisers, barbecue dinners for sales to raise funds for whatever is needed...

“If you plug in whatever memories are near and dear to you,” he said, “and that is part of what makes our school.”

He went on with the WHS Alma Mater, which continues

“Though the years and miles may part us

“Hearts are always near”

With that, Judge Smith said he can tell from his experience that wherever a person is, and no matter how old they are, the schools they attended are part of who they are.

He went on with the WHS Alma Mater, which continues

“Faithful true forever

“Honor love

“We pledge to thee...”

And this is when he spoke about the Williston Alumni Association’s Cake Auction in April, which generated more than \$27,000 for landscaping and other items for the new school.

This happened, Judge Smith said, because of “the appreciation, love and honor we have for our community and our school.

“And so in conclusion, the alma mater says, ‘ Hail to thee our alma mater’ / Williston High School.

Today, he said, the memories, traditions, love and honor are brought forward into the school, which people are rightfully proud to call Williston Middle High School.

Superintendent Hastings reminded everyone that the school was built, not for the parents, not for the adults and the alumni, but instead it was built for the kids.

JEFF EDISON

Assistant Superintendent of Administration Jeff Edison was introduced by Hastings as being one of the people involved with the whole project since its inception.

Edison said he remembers the first applications made for funding from the state six years ago, and then in 2013 a trip to the Florida Department of Education in Tallahassee to present the case from Levy County for special facilities’ funding.

He used a book as a metaphor, noting the title page, dedication pages in some books, “... but the heart of a book is its body.”

“Today,” Edison said, “we are acknowledging many people who were instrumental in bringing this school from a conversation to be a reality.”

The single reason for all of this, he said, is for the student body.

“The first chapter of the Williston Middle High School book,” Edison said, “is titled Class of 2017.”

This and subsequent chapters, Edison said, will use these resources and expand upon the Williston tradition of excellence. Likewise, Edison said, he is certain this will become a great read and a classic.

“It will captivate and inspire students in many classes to come,” he said.

Edison said he is happy to have been part of writing the first part of this book.

KEN AUSLEY

Ken Ausley of ACA Construction Group of Ocala spoke on behalf of the company.

“It’s been an absolute pleasure to work with everyone here,” Ausley said.

He noted his appreciation for the Levy County School District administration and the Levy County School Board.

The company works in several communities building schools and he said Levy County has “a first rate team.”

Ausley said he is certain that architect Paul Stressing would concur with his assessment of the leaders in the Levy County School System.

HardisonInk.com

Just as the people of Levy County experienced the loss with Robert Philpot's untimely death, ACA Construction suffered a similar sorrow, he said.

Ray Davis was the superintendent for this construction project, and he died from a heart attack midway through it, Ausley said.

James G. "Jim" Hurry and his team did a phenomenal job, Ausley said, as he took up the construction project superintendent's duties and completed the work after the death of Davis.



Levy County School Board Member Brad Etheridge speaks about the excellent effort put forth by so many people to assure students in Levy County receive a fine public education.

BRAD ETHERIDGE

Levy County School Board Member Brad Etheridge was appointed to fill the unexpired term of the late Robert Philpot.

Etheridge was unopposed in the current race, and will therefore serve another four years.

He provided the closing remarks.

There is far more than the brick and mortar to build the school, he said. From the secretarial staff through the cafeteria staff, and other people who made the school open well on the first day, he said.

He quoted the late Robert Philpot who said the reason there is a new school being built is because "We've got a bunch of good young 'uns."

He mentioned that the WMHS Class of 2017 will include his daughter, who will be in the fourth generation of his family as graduating from WHS.

School Board Member Etheridge predicated there are good odds that his grandchildren will graduate from this institution.

This was the first year for him as a School Board member with a first day of school. He went to WMHS on its very first day.

As they had arrived, the many students looked like they were at a University of Florida football game where the visitors were on the wrong side of the field, but within minutes staff had everyone in the right places, he said.

HardisonInk.com

After the first bell, all students were in classes and school had begun, he said.

“It’s a miracle,” Etheridge said. “It’s a miracle what staff does.”

Some people may take it for granted, he said, but he considers it a miracle that 1,100 children were all fed lunch on the first day at WMHS and every school day since then to now, and into the future.

A lot of hard work done by a lot of good people is what brought these results, he said.

“We got a bunch of good young ‘uns in Williston,” School Board Member Etheridge said.

“And that’s why we got a new facility.”

Refreshments at the dedication ceremony were catered by The Gathering Table of Chiefland.

Among the many other dignitaries and visitors were Levy County Sheriff Robert “Bobby” McCallum Jr., Eighth Judicial Circuit Court Judge James M. Colaw, County Commissioner Mike Joyner, County Commissioner John Meeks, Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat, Williston City Council Vice President Nancy Winger, Williston City Councilman Danny Etheridge and Williston City Councilman Matt Brooks (who is also a County Commission candidate).



The presentation of the program begins.

HardisonInk.com



Part of the Wall of Fame shows names of students who have mastered certain computer programs. There is even more than what is shown here.

HardisonInk.com



FFA classrooms and labs are included in the Vocational Suite wing.

HardisonInk.com



WHS AJROTC Cadet Robert Shinn stands next to a target for an air rifle. The range is 30 feet wide and 90 feet long. Shooters take aim at these targets from 33 feet. The potential exists for competition in this range this year.

HardisonInk.com



This view down one hallway falls short of capturing the distance from each of the four corners of the WMHS campus, and how long it would take to tour the whole campus.

HardisonInk.com



This is the WMHS gym as seen from the front parking lot looking toward its lobby. Football games are happening this season at the same field as previously.