



UNDY KEAST RODMAN/TIMES-DISPATCH

E. Dianne Watkins wants to hear pealing again in the tower of the Belgian Friendship Pavilion at Virginia Union University.

14 bells needed so VUU tower can ring again

Group raising money to bring music back to historic structure

BY JUAN ANTONIO LIZAMA
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

She stood close to the tower that rises to the sky and pointed to the empty belfry.

"It has no voice," E. Dianne Watkins said. "And it has been that way for 65 years."

Watkins is on a mission to bring music back to the tower of the Belgian Friendship Pavilion, a historic landmark at Virginia Union University.

Bells for Peace Inc. is a nonprofit organization founded by Watkins in December 2004. The group will have an inaugural fundraising concert tomorrow featuring producer and director Ray Chew of "Showtime at the Apollo" fame, and pianist, harpist and singer Paul Balfour. It will also feature local and state church choir groups and the Suffolk Ballet.

The organization's purpose is to leverage local, national and international support to raise about \$800,000 to replace the bells at the tower and create an endowment for maintenance. A second and third phase to repair the building and create a world studies department are also planned, Watkins said.

"It's humbling to me to be put in a place and time to let the story about this building be known," she said.

Watkins, with the help of her brother Alan Nelson, who lives in New Jersey, learned two years ago that the bells that ring in the Hoover Tower at Stanford University are the same that were extracted from the Belgian Friendship Pavilion.

The building was a \$700,000 gift by the Belgium government to VUU in 1941. The structure was brought to New York for the 1939-40 World's Fair, but it could

Want to go?

What: Bells for Peace Inc. benefit concert.

When: 5 p.m. tomorrow
Where: St. Paul's Baptist Church, 4247 Creighton Road

For more information:
www.bellsforpeace.org

not be returned to Nazi-occupied Belgium after the start of World War II.

So it was donated to VUU.

Watkins recalled her uncle, John Malcus Ellison Sr., then president of the institution, returning to campus with cash in a paper bag as part of an effort to raise \$500,000 to transport the building to Richmond.

The Belgium government let the university have the building. However, it donated the 35-bell carillon to Stanford University in gratitude for Herbert Hoover's assistance during World War I.

Since she discovered the bells' connection to VUU, Watkins said, a lot of people asked, "Are we going to get our bells back?" Her answer has been no, but that 14 bells — the lightest 184 pounds, the heaviest two tons and 730 pounds — will replace them.

Watkins, who retired last month as a coordinator of professional development for Richmond schools, graduated from VUU in 1965.

She walked around the building being used as an art classroom and theater and showed how some of the bricks on the exterior have peeled off.

"It's a shame," she said.

Damaged by Hurricane Isabel in 2003, the tower underwent repairs recently.

"It looks like this time," she said, "the constructors made sure that it is here to stay."

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