Will There Be Bells In the Tower? Yes!

By DIANNE WATKINS

"Will there really be bells in the tower? Are you sure?"

These were recent questions passionately asked of me by a fellow Virginia Union University alumna. Her questions have come as a result of the "Bells for Peace" campaign that raises public awareness about an important historical gift from Belgium to Virginia Union University in 1941.

Bells for Peace, Inc., a non-profit charity, was founded in March 2004, when information emerged linking the Belgian Friendship Building of Virginia Union University to Stanford University. The building, the pavilion of the 1939-40 New York World's Fair, was awarded to Virginia Union University because of its mission and location. Belgium was under siege by Germany, hence the building could not be returned to Belgium. The building is a designated United States Treasure and Virginia Historical Landmark. Virginia Union University is an African-American institution that opened in 1865 at the end of the Civil War, one of the first in the nation. Belgium's gift was a powerful gesture of international goodwill.

BELGIUM PRESENTED the curio of 36 tower bells from its pavilion to former President Herbert Hoover for his new library at Stanford University before the building left New York. The gift to Hoover was in appreciation of his humanitarian relief efforts to the Belgian people after WWI. Neither university had a record of their common history until March 2004, when the connection came to light. It is only in recent months that World's Fair archivists learned of the existence of the Belgian Friendship Building at Virginia Union University.

"Bells for Peace" was founded on the joint legacy of John Malcom Ellison Sr. (1889-1979), the first African-American president of Virginia Union University, and his wife, Elizabeth Balfour Ellison (1911-1994). Their determination during a challenging social and economic era enabled countless students to make profound contributions to their communities worldwide. It was through the efforts of Ellison, as well as some compassionate donors, that a half million dollars was given to transport, reconstruct and restore the building in Richmond. His supporters had kept the building and the Associated Press's July 15, 1928, report in mind.

"Bells for Peace" envisions a new environment in the Belgian Friendship Building's 160-foot Robert L. Vann Memorial Tower beginning with a chime of bells and extending to full restoration of the building. It highlights the unique structure in Richmond and the history of its designer, Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957), one of the greatest architects of his time. The Belgian Friendship Building is his only masterpiece in America; its majestic tower can be seen from many areas of the Richmond community.

Accomplishing this feat is of course ambitious, understanding that will ultimately provide renewed hope: those who understand the significance of this international landmark. The symbolic tower belfry that remains empty and silent in a community values its treasures to the utmost. It is a message that speaks of progress and friendship, and that in the long run, will help the historic Virginia Union University, with its humble beginnings and its place in black history, to develop and thrive.

CURRENTLY, support for "Bells for Peace" is coming from various groups. The Academy of Fellows included an announcement in its spring newsletter to 4,000 readers worldwide and sent representatives to visit the building. The Guild of Carillonneurs in North America rang their bells on April 23, 2006, to commemorate the annual event of the Bells for Peace program. Members carillonneurs are distributing information internationally, and their stories are helping the organization's success. A greater Richmond metropolitan area can share in this initiative, one that will ignite a spirit of unity and pride for the entire community, state, nation, world.

"Will there really be bells in the tower? Are you sure?" My resounding answer is "Yes!"

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Dianne Watkins, a 1965 graduate of Virginia Union University, is president and founder of Bells for Peace, Inc. She was reared by her aunt and uncle and Mrs. John M. Ellison Sr. on the VUU campus.